

Middle Ages, saved by the bulbs



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As a small-town boy growing up in southwest Michigan, Scott Kunst had a lot to love besides chasing butterflies. There was his grandmother and her garden. And dinosaurs and fossils. He wanted to be a paleontologist.

He always stayed close to his grandmother and gardening, and, if he's not a paleontologist, he came close. "I feel like that's what I'm doing now," he says, "sifting through the dirt for forgotten things."

In a sense of research and preservation, he's digging up heirloom bulbs, which he sells through his Ann Arbor, Mich.-based mail-order and online catalog, Old House Gardens (oldhousegardens.com). As befits his operation, the name is literal — the house that is company headquarters was built in 1889. Of course, that's pretty recent compared to some of the bulbs he sells, which go back to the Middle Ages.

Like the wild *Gladiolus byzantinus*, which made its debut in 1576 when it was known as corn flag of Constantinople or Turkish Flag. Each year, Scott honors a particular bulb and the Byzantine gladiolus is his fall bulb of 2006. Normally, I associate *Gladiolus* with funeral home arrangements but there's nothing doleful about this joyful rosy-purple small-flowered perennial that grows in the garden of one of my horticultural heroes, the late Christopher Lloyd of England. Scott says he believes it should thrive on Long Island, especially in sandy soil.

I've already ordered mine, and I've got my eye on other spring-bloomers such as Butter & Eggs, a double-yellow daffodil that dates back to 1777, and *Tulipa acuminata* — a red-and-yellow tulip that looks more like a daddy longlegs than a tulip and is believed to have gotten its start in the early 1700s. As well as a 1914 debutante called Insulinde. It's known as a broken tulip because a benign virus causes the flower's color to separate into striking patterns. Sap-sucking insects such as aphids spread the virus, so you have to keep this bulb away from other tulips and lilies. The modern versions of these once-coveted blooms are called Rembrandt tulips, and they're genetically patterned so you don't have to worry about where they're planted.

The catalog description of Insulinde is enough to make



you swoon: "Like a sunrise in slow motion, it opens with baby-smooth, pale-yellow petals feathered with violet and rose, and then, day by day, it transforms itself into a big, lightly ruffled flower of creamy white flamed with purple." It's a 16-inch-tall late-bloomer that found its way to Scott from the Hortus Bulborum, a volunteer-run bulb garden in Holland that grows and preserves about 2,500 rare varieties that are commercially extinct.

I've had Scott on my to-write-about list for a while, and now that many of us are busy planting bulbs, I thought



OLD HOUSE GARDENS PHOTOS

this would be a good time to call him. And then his catalog came and I spotted the Byzantine gladiolus. Usually in autumn you're digging out gladioli for winter storage. Who would imagine that there's a species you could actually plant in the fall — and one that doesn't look like a gladiolus? You don't even have to stake it.

Scott says his Byzantine beauty — which blooms at the end of spring — is a true son of the South, faithful to the plants found in old cottage gardens in Dixie. "I used to be an English teacher," he says, "so I like definitions. I'm 55

this year, so I know that 'old' is relative. An heirloom bulb is old, you can define that as you want. But mostly, to me, an heirloom bulb is endangered — if there are a million available in mainstream catalogs, well, that plant doesn't need my help. We're selling antiques."

Scott started helping plants in his grandmother's garden in Niles, Mich. "My grandmother was always so nurturing, and I loved the garden, which was an extension of my fascination with birds and chipmunks and other creatures." In the 1980s, he bought an old house with an old yard. He realized that

the tiger lilies and white peonies in the garden had their own history. His research led to a master's degree in historic preservation and a stint teaching courses in historic landscapes.

And then, along came the Prince of Austria — or it might be more correct to say there went the Prince of Austria. It's a fragrant, orange-red tulip with an 1860 pedigree. Scott noticed that the bulb seemed to have dropped out of catalogs. "It was the best tulip I ever grew," he says. "I wondered, 'Do I hold the last Prince of Austria tulips in my hands?' It's such a great plant, I couldn't let it disappear." So he typed a three-page mis-

Counter-clockwise from top left: Insulinde tulip; Butter & Eggs daffodil; Prince of Austria tulip; Kaiser Wilhelm dahlia; and Gladiolus Byzantinus.

sive about the disappearing tulip and mailed out 500 copies. "An amazing thing happened. People started to respond — they wanted to help, they wanted to grow Prince of Austria in their own gardens." The result was the establishment of Old House Gardens in 1993. The

Prince of Austria still reigns in the catalog.

Most of Scott's offerings are grown in the United States. They're supplied by a network of heirloom bulb collectors and growers, from a Texas daffodil-devotee and a British potato farmer-turned-hyacinth fanatic to England's National Dahlia Collection and the volunteers at Hortus Bulborum.

"Our growers are just a bunch of bulb-loving fools," Scott says. The result is about 250 varieties of lilies, tulips, daffodils, crocuses, hyacinths, dahlias and a grab bag of others like *Muscari*, *Galanthus* and *Camassia*. His bulbs have found homes in historic gardens such as those at Mount Vernon, Colonial Williamsburg, Old Sturbridge Village and Hearst Castle.

The boy who loves bulbs already has chosen his spring-planting heirloom for 2007. It's Kaiser Wilhelm, a dilly of a dahlia with a green button-eye and neatly curled, custard-yellow petals bordered in burgundy. In Scott's world, it's more than just a flower. It's history.

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