

Turning history's light on bulbs



IRENE VIRAG

Outside, winter whispered in a chill breeze, but it was not a bad day for planting bulbs. Inside, it was a fine day for planting knowledge. It was late afternoon, and only my footsteps broke the silence as I moved slowly through the gallery at the New York Botanical Garden's LuEsther T. Mertz Library, absorbed by the contents of the books and artwork that deserved the exhibit's title — "Buried Treasures: The Nature and Art of Bulbs."

That's right — bulbs. I was bowled over by bulbs, and they weren't even in flower. Instead, they were depicted in marvelous folios published as many as four centuries ago, in hand-colored and botanically immaculate copperplate engravings, in lithographs and watercolor paintings. And I actually read the texts that tell you almost everything you ever wanted to know about true bulbs like hyacinths and lilies and tulips and their close cousins — corms, rhizomes and tubers.

Bulbs, bulbs and more bulbs. Bulbs we eat like the tubers called potatoes and the alliums known as onions. Native bulbs like Solomon's seal and wild trilliums that color our island's woodlands. Naturalized bulbs like the daffodils that multiply each year in my backyard. Bulbs like colchicums that get planted on the cusp of fall and

flower before that season makes its bittersweet departure.

Bulbs that shook nations. Like tulips. When "tulipomania" rocked Holland in the 1630s, trade speculation over streaked and striped tulips became so wild that a single bulb of one cultivar commanded more gilders than canal-front real estate. Fortunes were made and lost, and the tulip trade had to be suspended for a year before the government could restore economic order. And like potatoes. When a fungal blight did in the potato crop in Ireland, the resulting famine killed as many as a million people and sparked an emigration that would enrich the United States.

I learned more than a few things. One nugget of information concerned saffron, a flavoring I do not spread about with abandon but prefer to savor in the biryani I gorge on in Indian restaurants. I knew saffron came from autumn-flowering *Crocus sativus*, but I wasn't quite sure why it was expensive. Now, I know. The spice comes from the plant's three bright orange-red styles — the narrow and elongated parts of the pistil — and 1,700 flowers are needed to yield just one ounce of dried saffron threads.

For me, there's joy in such facts. Like knowing that *Lilium speciosum*, shown in a colorful lithograph, is a parent of the Stargazer lilies that summer in so many of our gardens. It's a little like my musician stepson's predilection for rock trivia. Except that I'm a gardener. I was intrigued by an engraving of two hyacinths side

by side — one being forced in soil, the other in a glass jar much like the one on my kitchen counter. I could almost smell the flowers. But what got me was that the engraving was made more than 200 years ago.

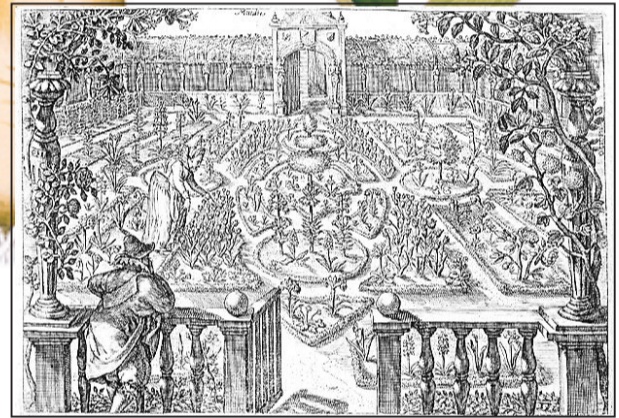
When I caught up with the curator of the show, bulb expert Judy Glattstein, she said the engraving especially pleased her. "As far as I know, it's the first description of forcing hyacinths in water."

Judy calls bulbs her obsession and talks about the 40,000 she has tucked around her nine acres in New Jersey. "If just one person finds a fascination, and it starts them down the garden path, then the exhibit will have done what I hoped."

For more than an hour, I had the exhibit to myself. The scholarship and surroundings touched me, the silence added to my introspection. I felt such respect for the art and for the folios — some written in Latin, others in Italian and old English — and for the gardeners who created them.

I was charmed by a copperplate engraving in a folio and a silkscreen reproduction on the wall. Created in 1615 by a Dutch teenager, it shows a spring garden filled with flowering bulbs, including *Fritillaria imperialis*, then known as *Corona imperialis*. The engraving by Crispijn van de Passe, with its ground-level perspective, widely influenced 17th century gardens.

A centuries-old illustration



A lithograph, top, of a flowering crinum by 19th century botanist Nathaniel Wallich and a 17th century engraving of a garden from "Buried Treasures" at the New York Botanical Garden

of another *Corona imperialis* touched a familiar chord. Not only do I dote on fritillarias, but the artist was a 17th century master, Basilius Besler. I immediately thought of a large and lovely copy of his classic "Florilegium" — first published in 1613 — that has a place of honor in my den and delights me with its drawings of plants from the garden he helped to create for the bishop-prince of Eichstatt in Nuremberg.

And I was lost in one of the exhibit's outstanding folios, "Temple of Flowers" by Robert John Thornton, a Londoner whose book came out in 1812 and immediately flopped. Or as the text for the display put it, the volume "cost him his reputation and his fortune."

Today, it's considered a folio for the ages. Thornton had a thing for commas and long sentences, but he had style. Describing a mezzotint of tulips, he wrote: "Most prominent in our group, you see a tulip, named after

that unfortunate French monarch, Louis XVI, then in the meridian of his glory; and it rises above the rest with princely majesty, the edges of whose petals are stained with black, which is the true emblem of sorrow."

I contemplated my own garden and its constant poetry. I thought about the way people have planted through the ages, digging in bulbs in autumn and watching them flower in spring. I contemplated the display cases in the dimly lit gallery and realized I was part of a continuum. And I felt a sense of reverence.

Write to Irene Virag at 1019 Fort Salonga Rd., Suite 10, #302, Northport, NY 11768 or email irenevirag@optonline.net. Visit her blog at irenevirag.com.

17 model trains on track for the holidays



THE NEW YORK BOTANICAL GARDEN

The cityscape is fashioned from nuts, berries and such.

"Buried Treasures" celebrates the nature and art of bulbs with masterpieces of botanical artwork as well as rare books and lavishly illustrated folios. The exhibition, in the LuEsther T. Mertz Library at the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx, is open through Jan. 7.

While you're at the garden, check out the Holiday Train Show in the Enid A. Haupt Conservatory, where 17 model trains glide and whistle through a cityscape of more than 140 New York landmarks fashioned from seeds and berries and pods and pine cones and other plant parts. You can read about it on my blog at irenevirag.com. Visit nybg.org for more information.