

AHS MEMBERS MAKING A DIFFERENCE: Scott Kunst

by Julia Polentes

WHEN PONDERING his garden, Scott Kunst thinks of his family's Christmas tree. "Every year we add more and more ornaments. There's the one our neighbors gave us our first Christmas here, one from my wife's mother when she visited us, one from my great-grandmother," he explains. "The tree is pretty to other people, but there's a deeper beauty for us, because there's so much more personal meaning." Similarly, gardens are beautiful to look at and can also be filled with history.

This aspect of gardening has been Kunst's passion for more than three decades, particularly through his business, Old House Gardens, in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He founded it in 1983 as a research and consulting service for historic landscaping after earning his master's degree in historic landscape preservation from the University of Michigan. Tracking down heirloom plants for clients led him to cross paths with a botanist who later sent him a box of specimens collected from remnants of older landscapes. This gift led Kunst to an epiphany: Historic plants were everywhere, not just in catalogs, which often didn't identify them as such. This happened to be particularly true in the case of antique bulbs.

HEIRLOOM BULB BUSINESS

Kunst, who became an American Horticultural Society member in 1989, started to seriously research and collect rare bulbs. Although authoritative records weren't available in America, he discovered that the bulb industry in the Netherlands published listings of tens of thousands of bulbs by name and year introduced. These listings became instrumental to his efforts. One tulip cultivar from 1860 called 'Prince of Austria' became a favorite early on. Despite its sunset orange petals, its exceptionally strong, intoxicating scent, and its ability to return year after

year—even after enduring Michigan's wet summers—it disappeared completely from American catalogs. Kunst felt he had a responsibility to make it available again. So, in 1993, he mailed out 500 copies of a three-page catalog, featuring this tulip along with



With the goal of preserving the best bulbs of the past in order to enrich gardens today, Kunst and his team have continued to track down bulb species and varieties in danger of disappearing, and then recruit American farmers to grow them, or propagate the bulbs themselves on micro-farms around their community.

A GROUP EFFORT

Over the years, Old House Gardens has saved numerous bulbs from extinction. 'Clara Butt', introduced in 1889, which, at one time, was the world's most popular tulip, is one example. Its

catalog also features centuries-old varieties like 'Zomerschoon', which was released in 1620, and graced the Dutch aristocracy's gardens during the infamous Tulipomania. It supplies bulbs like these to historic landscapes and public

gardens all over the United States, including George Washington's Mount Vernon in Virginia.

This spring, Kunst is sending out bulbs for the last time before retiring in May, leaving the business in the hands of a skilled team of bulb enthusiasts who will continue his work to preserve invaluable components of our garden heritage. "It's really gratifying to have a pipe dream and make it real, but now that I'm retiring, I keep coming back to people I've worked with and met," he muses, referring to the "far-flung, worldwide village of people who have helped turn this dream into a reality." Likening Old House Gardens to the story of stone soup, where each character adds an important ingredient to the final product, he feels that the nursery's achievements are "way bigger and better than what any of us could have done alone."

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Top: 'Prince of Austria', the tulip that helped launch a successful bulb business. **Top right:** Old House Gardens' first catalog. **Above:** Scott Kunst with his wife, Jane, and rescue dog, Toby.

other rare bulbs he hoped gardeners would want to grow.

To his surprise, he was overwhelmed with orders and encouragement. Old House Gardens—Heirloom Bulbs took off from there, tripling sales the following year.

