

ENGLEWOOD, CHATHAM, AUBURN GRESHAM

In Englewood, Thousands Of Tulips Are Blooming — During The Winter

Tulips are typically grown in the spring and summer. Southside Blooms' new growing system will produce 18,000 in time for Valentine's Day. Here's how you can order a bouquet.



By Maia McDonald
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Travis Wilkinson tends to the tulips growing in the basement at the Chicago Eco House in Englewood on Jan. 11, 2023. Credit: Colin Boyle/Block Club Chicago

ENGLEWOOD — There's an unusual sight popping up on the South Side: Tulips are blooming — in the middle of a Chicago winter.

Southside Blooms, the flower shop of Englewood-based nonprofit **Chicago Eco House**, 6250 S. Morgan St., is growing 18,000 tulips indoors for a good cause. The program — **which has been featured on TV** — is known for creating jobs for at-risk youth and converting vacant lots into community assets.

Tulips typically pop up in the spring, but Southside Blooms' staff members are growing varieties in batches at the Eco House, then harvesting them for local youth to sell through Southside Blooms, said farm manager Travis Wilkinson.

Wilkinson said the project is “super exciting.” He expects the tulips to be a popular pick for people who want to skip roses for Valentine's Day. People **can buy delivered bouquets and gifts here**, including **a Valentine's Day bundle for \$75**.

“This is completely new,” Wilkinson said. “We had our first winter bouquet that we made from these flowers, the harvest that I've been doing. ... This is the first time we've ever had flowers in the winter, in January.”



Tulips grow in the basement at the Chicago Eco House in Englewood on Jan. 11, 2023. Credit: Colin Boyle/Block Club Chicago



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Wilkinson and other Southside Blooms staff did research to develop their method of growing tulips in the winter, Wilkinson said. Before managing Southside Blooms' tulip growing effort, Wilkinson worked as a farmer in Idaho, he said. His strong interest in agriculture led Wilkinson to move to Chicago to join Southside Blooms in early 2022, he said.

“This role is ... not only flowers. It's definitely community-based and learning how to create something that builds the community, gives back to the community, empowers the community, and also empowers the land and empowers just the area at large,” Wilkinson said.

Groups of tulip bulbs are planted in dirt-filled crates and placed in a dark, temperature-controlled room in the basement of Chicago Eco House. The room stays between 40 and 50 degrees, and bulbs are continuously watered to help the roots grow, Wilkinson said.

Once the bulbs have grown roots, they're switched to a grow room with red and blue UV lights that give off heat and simulate the conditions tulips would naturally experience to finish the rest of the growing process, Wilkinson said.

The lights, which appear fuschia to the human eye, are better suited for the tulips than typical, white grow lights because plants more readily absorb red and blue than other colors, making them grow faster, Wilkinson said. The compost produced at Chicago Eco House from the chickens raised there also helps the flowers grow, Wilkinson said.



Travis Wilkinson tends to the tulips at the Chicago Eco House. Credit: Colin Boyle/Block Club Chicago



Travis Wilkinson tends to the tulips growing in the basement at the Chicago Eco House in Englewood on Jan. 11, 2023. Credit: Colin Boyle/Block Club Chicago

Wilkinson is trying to switch out about 3,000 tulips every two weeks. The growing space at Chicago Eco House can handle about 6,000 flowers at a time, he said.

It's been a large but rewarding undertaking, Wilkinson said.

“A lot of people, they suggest starting with like 3,000 tulips bulbs your first year, but we kind of went large and went with 18,000,” Wilkinson said. “A bit ambitious, but it's been good. It's meant that we've had a lot of work. I was expecting to just kind of be doing research and creating a farm plan for the winter, but the fact that we're actually growing product right now is amazing.”

Another 9,000 tulip bulbs are being stored in shipping containers at a farm in Little Village because there is not enough room at Chicago Eco House to do the rooting process for all of the flowers simultaneously, Wilkinson said.

Tulips typically take months to grow naturally, but the Southside Blooms team has been able to accelerate the process to produce more flowers in a fraction of the time, Wilkinson said.

Wilkinson originally didn't think Southside Blooms would be able to handle growing such a large amount of flowers without an extensive greenhouse setup, he said.

"I think that the biggest problem for farmers in general, is it's a seasonal job," Wilkinson said. "You're gonna have a product in the summer and winter. So this is turning out to be something that we can employ throughout the year, which is awesome."



Tulips are harvested in the basement at the Chicago Eco House in Englewood on Jan. 11, 2023. Credit: Colin Boyle/Block Club Chicago



Tulips grow in the basement at the Chicago Eco House in Englewood on Jan. 11, 2023. Credit: Colin Boyle/Block Club Chicago

New tulips will continuously get cycled in and out as full-grown ones are harvested for bouquets and younger plants are ready to make the jump to the warmer grow room, Wilkinson said. Different varieties will be grown by the new system, while other flowers — like lilies, sunflowers, zinnias, cosmos, amaranth and sunflowers — will be grown at Southside Blooms’ five other farms on the South and West sides.

Southside Blooms is still determining what this growing system will look like during the summer, Wilkinson said.

“This system, we’re gonna see how we can maybe integrate it into the summer because it’s an efficient use of space,” Wilkinson said.

Through recent grants, Southside Blooms will also be able to install more solar panels at Chicago Eco House and hire a full-time farming assistant, Wilkinson said. They’ll work on other projects throughout the year, as well, he said.

Wilkinson also hopes Southside Blooms’ tulips project can inspire other Chicagoans.

“I would hope people take inspiration from this and kind of run with it,” Wilkinson said. “I think there is a need for localization and community-building and all of these things that I’ve been interested in for a while.

“But it gives me inspiration, and I hope that the flowers people receive give them inspiration. I hope people are inspired to run with that, to build something that gives back to the community and in so many ways, that gives back environmentally, that gives back socially and culturally.”

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