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**October 2017 Bulbs**

Spring blooming bulbs are one of the easiest ways to add color to the landscape with the least amount of effort. You can dig a hole, drop in a bulb, then sit back and wait for spring flowers. In a matter of months, these small, unattractive brown bulbs turn into glorious displays of flowers. In many cases, these same bulbs will continue to flower, year after year. Fall is the ideal time to plant, so get out your shovel, and start planting.

By definition, a true bulb is a modified leaf bud, consisting of a basal plate, short thick stem and fleshy scales. The bulb contains all plant parts and serves as a storage organ. While not all spring blooming bulbs are true bulbs, most underground storage organs, including rhizomes, corms, tubers and pips are collectively called “bulbs”. If you plant it in a dried, bulbous state, and wait for the leaves and flowers to appear, we can give it the name “bulb”. When purchasing bulbs, keep in mind that the bulb you buy at the nursery already contains everything that the bulb needs to flower for that season—leaves, roots, stems and flowers. When choosing bulbs look for large bulbs, which are firm and blemish free. The size of the bulb determines the size of the flower next spring. Bargain bulbs may not end up being quite such a bargain if they are too small. Whether or not your bulbs bloom the next year will be determined by which bulbs you are growing and the care they get during the period immediately after bloom. Once its seasonal cycle is complete and the foliage dies back, everything is set for the following season.

Bulbs are usually sold in their dormant or dry state. When planted, they begin to initiate roots, and the stems inside the bulbs begin to grow. The plants utilize their stored food reserves, and the shoots begin to emerge. When they begin flowering, the storage organ or bulb, is empty of food. After bloom, they need to replenish the storage organ for the upcoming dormancy. Spring blooming bulbs need to go through a chilling process in order to reach their full potential. Typically a minimum of 12-16 weeks of temperatures between 35 and 50 degrees Fahrenheit are required for the bulbs to stretch and elongate a stem and leaves. Without natural chilling outdoors or forced chilling in the refrigerator, the bulbs rarely exceed a couple of inches in height and shatter their blooms.

When planting your bulbs, you can dig individual holes for each bulb (which can be difficult in our rocky soils) or mass plant. It is often easier to dig up a larger planting area, scatter your bulbs in, and then fill the soil back in. A general rule of planting depth is to plant two to three times the size of the bulb, deep in the ground. Small bulbs are planted shallow, while big bulbs need a deeper hole. You can layer different bulbs in the same planting area. Choose a site with good drainage—especially in the winter. Standing water and bulbs is not a good combination.

When planting bulbs, grouping them together in clusters will make a stronger impact than a single row of bulbs. A mass planting will make a huge impact in the spring, and they can easily be planted under your winter annual plantings of pansies, violas and dianthus. The bulbs will come up around them and add to the seasonal color

display.

All spring blooming bulbs require a minimum of six to eight weeks following bloom for the foliage to grow and manufacture food to replenish that bulb for the next season. To insure the nutrition is there for the bulbs, fertilize them when you see the flower bud emerging from the leaves. Fertilize with a general complete fertilizer such as 13-13-13 or 10-10-10. You can allow the foliage to die back on its own after flowering, or simply wait six to eight weeks after flowering and cut the leaves off. Research has shown that the bulb has completed its life cycle 6-8 weeks following bloom. Avoid braiding or twisting the foliage after bloom which can hinder the leaf's ability to manufacture food and may impact next year's blooms.

Spring bulbs are out there in abundance now. While you can always add to your collection of daffodils or hyacinths, consider some of the more unusual bulbs like alliums and snowdrops. Even within the old tried and true daffodils, there are some unusual options. Not all daffodils are yellow, some are white, some have orange or pink centers, and some are fragrant. By careful consideration you can have daffodils in bloom from late January through April. Most daffodils are long lived, and provided they get some sunlight following bloom, will re-bloom year after year. Crocus bulbs may not stop traffic because of their demure stature, but they are a reliable performer year after year. Give crocus room to spread, because they will multiply. Hyacinths are one of the most fragrant spring bloomers with clusters of pink, purple or white flowers. They also will re-bloom with ease for many years, if you fertilize annually when the flower buds are emerging.

Tulips are the showstopper in the garden, but most gardeners treat them as annuals, replanting new bulbs each year. Tulips are usually one of the last of our spring blooming bulbs to flower. Late spring temperatures can get quite warm in Arkansas and warm temperatures during bloom time can cause the flower display to pass quickly and the foliage to die back.

Experiment with spring blooming bulbs, and you may find some new favorites. Whether you are adding to your collection or starting from scratch, you have lots of options. Fall planting is easy—the hard part is the wait.







