

Janet B. Carson
Extension Horticulture Specialist
Arkansas Democrat-Gazette
Summer Bulbs Care – Sept. 2016

When you say bulbs, most people think of spring blooming bulbs such as daffodils and tulips, but there is a whole range of summer bulbs that grace our gardens. Some are winter hardy and are grown as perennials, while others are tender and must be lifted and stored for the winter months. Summer bulbs include elephant ears, caladiums, dahlias, gladiolus, lilies, lycoris (surprise lilies), amaryllis and pineapple lilies.

Common elephant ears are winter hardy statewide, but some of the more decorative varieties with variegated or dark foliage are only moderately hardy. To protect your investment and to ensure you have these bulbs every year, you should lift and store them either before a frost or immediately after one. Caladiums are closely related but are never winter hardy. Both of these plants have thrived with our mild, moist summer and we have some of the largest plants we have seen. Caladiums thrive in warm soils, so don't be too quick to replant next spring. If the soil is cool at planting time, they are often slow to establish.

Dahlias come in many sizes and shapes of blooms and occasionally will overwinter in a mild winter. Since they are native to Mexico and Central America, they like a fairly mild winter. To guarantee they will come back next season, it is best to dig the bulbous structure in the fall. Dahlias grow from a tuberous root system—it has a central stalk with fleshy stems radiating out from it.

Lycoris (surprise lilies), cannas, lilies, and pineapple lilies (Euchomis) are considered winter hardy in Arkansas, and can be left in the ground from year to year. If you have cannas that need division, they can be divided as they emerge in the spring, or you can lift the bulbs this fall and store for the winter, then divide and replant in the spring. Lilies that are too crowded, can also be dug, divided and then immediately replanted in the fall.

Digging and storing tender bulbs does require some work and you will need to consider your storage space. I usually treat some summer bulbs as summer annuals, planting new ones each year. I always buy new caladium bulbs and if an amaryllis comes back that is a bonus. But this is your decision; you can save them all or be selective and only save bulbs that are expensive or hard to find. How cold our winter is can also determine the survival rates, but there is no way of predicting that in advance, so to be on the safe side you will need to lift and store the more tender bulbs if you want to guarantee their return. If you want to take your chances, wait for a killing frost, then add an extra layer of mulch. Don't be too quick to add extra mulch. You want the plants to be dormant before covered up. If you add the extra covering while they are still actively growing, the bulbs will not have a chance to go dormant, and may rot.

To store the bulbs, you have several options. When the leaves begin to decline in the garden you can begin to dig them, but if they are still showy and growing well, wait until closer to frost or immediately after a frost. Cut off the spent foliage and dig up the bulbs. Use caution that you don't injure the bulbs as you are digging them. Don't divide the cluster of bulbs as they go into storage, leave them intact until spring, and then divide as you replant next season. Before storing the bulbs, you want to air dry or cure

the bulbs. Lay them in a single layer on top of newspapers in a cool, shady dry place for several days or up to a week. Then shake off as much dried soil as possible and store the dried bulbs in a breathable container. Store your bulbs in a cardboard box with a layer of dry peat moss, vermiculite, shipping peanuts or shredded paper. These bulbs need to be stored in something that protects them from totally drying out. They cannot be stored loose like spring-blooming bulbs or the bulbs will totally dry and be injured or killed. Don't store the bulbs in a non-breathable or plastic container, and don't crowd them too close together or they can rot during storage. Once you have them in the storage container, store it in a location that is cool, but will not freeze. Replant in the spring after all chances of frost have passed.

A variety of gladiolus bulbs are available for the garden. Some are hardier than others. Just like with caladiums, some gardeners treat their gladiolus as annuals and plant new bulbs each spring, but they too can be lifted and stored for the winter. They are treated a little differently than other summer bulbs, since gladiolus corms can be stored in the open, without the protection of peat moss or other filler. They produce corms which can be dug any time after the foliage has died back. Let them air dry for 2-3 weeks, then store them loose in a paper or mesh bag.

Many gardeners stock up during the holiday season on amaryllis bulbs. The showy large bulbs are not supposed to survive our winters outdoors, but we have been having more and more success these days. Many gardeners wait until a killing frost and then add an extra layer of mulch and wait until spring to check on survival. Others lift the bulbs as fall is ending and cut the foliage off. They then bring them indoors, pot them up and store in a cool, dry place and wait for new growth to begin. Once they see the bulbs begin to sprout, begin watering and move them into a sunny location. Typically they will be in bloom in 6-8 weeks indoors.

Most of our summer bulbs are still growing strong, but others have begun their decline. Knowing how to handle, store and/or divide them will allow you to make the most of the plants you grow.