

## Bulbs

Dig a hole, drop in a bulb, then sit back and wait for spring. For the lazy gardener, or those in a hurry, spring bulbs provide us spectacular spring color, for very little effort in the fall. And now is the time to plant them.



When you mention bulbs, most people immediately think of daffodils and tulips. And while they are wonderful bulbs, there are many other bulbs to choose from. Some different small flowers include snowdrops, crocus, grape hyacinths, winter aconite, and anemones. Larger flowers include Dutch iris, flowering onions called alliums, fritillaria and the crown imperial fritillaria. Of course don't exclude daffodils, hyacinths and tulips.

### What Are Bulbs?

Bulbs are self-sufficient storage organs, and are versatile in the landscape. There are bulbs for partial shade as well as full sun. All bulbous plants have similar life cycles. They go through periods of growth and flowering, followed by a dormancy period. Some are spring growers, while others grow in the summer or fall. Bulbs are usually sold in their dormant, 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.

### Choosing Bulbs

When choosing bulbs ( or rhizomes, corms, and tubers, which we collectively call bulbs, and are generally planted in the same manner), look for large bulbs, which are firm and blemish free. The size of the bulb determines the size of the flower. Remember, everything is already contained inside your bulb when you purchase them. Quality bulbs will give you a wonderful show, and should keep giving for years with a little care. Bargain bulbs may not end up being such a bargain.

### Choosing a Site

Be sure to choose a site with well drained soil. Even bulbs which like moisture, won't survive for long in water logged soil. Bulbs thrive in an environment rich in organic matter, and a porous soil. Incorporate organic matter before planting, and till it in well. Generally, bulbs need to be planted two to two and ½ times the size of the bulb, deep in the ground. Bulbs can be planted individually using a bulb planter. They also sell an auger drill bit that will fit on the end of your drill to make the planting holes. But if you are planting a large quantity of bulbs, it is easier and quicker to dig up a large area to the required depth, then space out the bulbs and cover them with soil. Be sure to plant the bulbs with the pointy end up, and use care when covering the bulbs with soil, that you don't knock the bulbs over in the process. When you have the soil in place, water well and mulch to keep weeds down. Since the bulbs are underground, you can also plant seasonal annuals, such as pansies or snapdragons on top of the bulbs. In the spring, the bulbs will emerge within your annual color.

### Fertilization

Fertilization is really not necessary at planting, but many people add bone meal around the bulbs to aid in root establishment. Fertilization is needed during the growing season to aid in the replenishment of the bulb. Fertilize once when the flower buds are beginning to open with a slow release fertilizer, or a general purpose fertilizer can be used when they show color, and again when the flowers have faded.

## **Bloom Life**

To extend the length of blooms, do a little homework. With proper variety selection you can have color from late January through April, all with spring bulbs. Decide where you need color, and what else is growing there, and when it blooms. You wouldn't want to plant hot pink tulips next to orange blooming azaleas, if they are in bloom at the same time. Color selection is important. Although your personal preferences are of the utmost importance, knowing which colors work together can help in the final outcome.

## **Colors**

An easy division of color is the cool versus warm colors. Reds, yellows and oranges are warm colors, while blues, purple and pinks are cool colors. Warm colors are intense and invigorating, while cool colors are peaceful and harmonious. Make sure your color choices blend in well with your existing landscape and home. The most successful plantings use solid blocks of color. Keep your color schemes simple, and only use a few colors.

## **Types**

The earliest bulbs include winter aconite and crocus. These small growing plants are rich in color, and can be planted in dappled shade to full sun. Crocus bulbs come in a variety of shades of white, yellows and purples. Crocus bulbs can be planted in your lawn area, simply removing some plugs of grass, then plant the small bulbs. The plants will emerge in the lawn area and by the time you need to mow for the first time, they will already be through. Winter aconite or eranthis, is not as common, but has lovely yellow, honey-scented flowers.

Snowdrops or galanthus, and snowflakes or leucojum are old-fashioned flowers. These small bulbs do best in partial shade, and have pretty white flowers. Bluebells and scillas are other good choices for a woodland bulb planting. They flower in mid spring and have lovely hyacinth like clusters of flowers in shades of blue, purple, pink or white. Grape hyacinth are lovely small flowering plants with dense spikes of purple flowers. Many have attractive spiky foliage which appears in the fall. When you talk about small flowers, remember that you will need more plants for a big impact.

If you are an iris fan, there are bulbous iris that bloom in early spring, and the foliage dies down at the end of their season. Dutch iris make a beautiful show in the spring, and you don't have to deal with the foliage year-round.

Some other unusual flowers are the flowering onion or flowering alliums. Height will vary by variety with dwarfs no taller than six inches to the giant alliums that can grow four to six feet tall. All of the alliums produce round flower heads, and come in shades of pink, purple or white. These unusual flowers can really add a focal point to your garden.

The fritillarias offer another interesting flower for the garden. This member of the lily family blooms in late spring, and bears its flowers in a cluster at the top of leafy stems. The impressive crown fritillaria is a show stopper in late season.

Experiment with new and interesting bulbs, but don't forget the tried-and-true. Hundreds of varieties of daffodils, tulips and hyacinths are available. Tulips, which provide one of the showiest displays, is often hard to get to bloom well again. This year, many of the local nurseries are offering heritage bulbs, or the old-fashioned tulips. These are supposed to rebloom better for us -- we'll have to wait and see. Regardless of their rebloom, no garden would be complete without some tulips. And if it is scent you are after, hyacinths are a must. And the spring sentinel for many is still the daffodil. Besides the traditional yellow, there are pinks, doubles, whites, and oranges available.

Bulbs are excellent for spring color, whether used as a mass planting, or in a mixture with other perennial or spring blooming shrubs, or in containers. The choices of colors, heights and bloom periods offers so many opportunities. Visit your local nursery and look at the options, then plant. Bulb planting season is from now through December.