

DORMANT ROSE BEDS FULL OF COLOR

By Marty Hammond
in collaboration with Jane Grilliot

Picture a cold, overcast February morning, a pruned rose bed with gorgeous yellow and white Narcissus, magnificent Hippeastrum (Amaryllis), lovely lavender blue Scilla, bright red Tulips, blue Muscari (Grape Hyacinth) and multi-colored Crocuses blooming in between the bare rose canes. Your rose beds do not need to look bare and uninteresting while your roses are dormant. We'd like you to encourage you to try early spring flowering bulbs as a companion to your roses. Some bulbs when planted in the ground will eventually invade the rose roots if not dug up and replanted occasionally. Others are planted shallow enough for them to naturalize without invading the roses. Jane plants her bulbs in the ground, Marty plants her bulbs in containers. Both methods have their advantages and disadvantages. Some bulbs such as tulips and giant hyacinths require a pre-cooling period so those planted in the ground need to be dug up and refrigerated, or new bulbs purchased each year.

When bulbs are planted in containers, they can be controlled. Containers used are 6" plastic and 1,2 & 3 gallon black landscape pots, partially buried to about $\frac{3}{4}$ deep in the soil or buried completely for a cleaner look. You might also use decorative containers set on top of the ground in between the roses if you are not afraid of having them sprout legs and walk away from your yard. Don't block the drainage holes, in fact, it's preferable to make extra drainage holes to allow ample root development beyond the bottom of the pot. Cover the holes with 1 or 2 thickness of news-paper to hold the soil in while planting. This paper quickly disintegrates and allows the roots to grow naturally. When the blooms from the bulbs have faded, lift the container from the rose bed, using a spading fork, so as many roots as possible are not damaged, placing the container in loose soil elsewhere out of sight, for storage and bulb development. Cut off the bloom stalk(s) and allow the foliage to continue to grow, as this feeds the bulb for next year. Eventually the foliage will die and can be cut off at that time. Bulbs should not be fertilized after the foliage has died, and this is difficult to control when left in place in the rose bed. However, Jane says she has not experienced any negative results when leaving the bulbs in the ground. The hold left from removing the container is then filled with another container of later blooming bulbs, small perennials, annuals, or filled in with mulch material which is removed in the fall when it's time to replant your bulbs. The advantages of using containers are control and versatility.

One of our favorite December through April blooming bulbs is the Hippeastrum (Amaryllis). Amaryllis roots like to be crowded, so they are ideal for containers. The bulb is planted with 1/3 of it still above the soil. It's not absolutely necessary to report every year; every two years is adequate. Amaryllis bulbs usually produce 1 to 3 stalks 18-24" tall with 3 or 4 blooms on each stalk. The buds bloom one or two at a time, so one bulb can bloom 4 to 6 weeks. These can be grown in full sun, or filtered sun. They may need to be staked however, because they can become quite top-heavy while blooming. The bloom stalk should be cut as soon as it is finished blooming. Stop watering and feeding the first of August, to encourage the foliage to die. Any remaining foliage should be cut off around the middle of October. Pre-cooling is recommended, but not necessary if it's kept in a cool dry place till about the middle or end of November, when you will begin watering slightly. Start feeding as soon as you see the bulb begin to sprout.

Some favorite early spring bulbs for borders are Scilla (English Bluebells and Spanish Bluebells), lavender Chionodoxa, Crocus and miniature Cyclamen, Narcissus with their graceful, cyclamen-like blooms. 'Jetfire' with lovely orange-red cups surrounded by curved yellow petals is a favorite, as is 'Tête-À-Tête', an all-yellow bloom, and 'Jack Snipe' with creamy-white petals and a vivid buttercup-yellow trumpet. All of these bloom early on 6-10" stems. They are all great for naturalizing or container growth.

The recommended depth for planting bulbs in the ground should strictly followed, however, when planting in a container, you can generally use the "equal to" rule which means the bulb is planted as deep as its size (except in the case of Amaryllis). In other words a 1" bulb is planted with 1" of soil covering the top of the bulb. Use a good bulb food at planting time, or begin a ½ strength liquid food when growth appears. Continue feeding for 6-8 weeks after blooms are spent.

Some early blooming Jonquilla and Triandrus Narcissus get to about 12-14", such as 'Ice Wings', an all-white bloom with two or three blooms per stem. 'Quail' is a long-lasting and fragrant specimen with rich bronze-yellow petals and slightly darker yellow funnel-shaped cup bloom. Each stem produces from two to six flowers. These two have been successfully grown in 1 gallon containers for several years. They multiply quickly so they must be re-potted each year.

One of the most popular early blooming taller Narcissus is the 'Paperwhite'. If it is forced indoors it may not produce as many blooms the following year. Other favorite taller, large-cupped varieties are 'Ice Follies', with pure white petals surrounding a yellow cup and 'King Alfred', a gorgeous large-cupped bright golden yellow. There are a lot of taller 16-18" varieties that are great for landscape or container growth. Anytime you plant these larger Narcissus, be sure to provide a large enough container. Some of these taller varieties may need to be staked, especially when grown in containers.

Crocuses are very early bloomers, but have a rather short blooming period and they shatter quickly. Muscari (Grape Hyacinths), Scilla (English and Spanish Blue bells) and Chionodoxa last about a month or even longer. All three of these bulbs are usually very inexpensive, about 25 bulbs for \$4.00 and should be planted in small groups.

Several bulbs tried in containers, bloomed great the first year, but did not bloom as well the second year. This can be attributed to several reasons. The bulbs became over crowded in the pot, the plants were shocked in moving, they dried out causing the foliage to die prematurely, or they needed but did not get a cooling period.

Allium (garlic family) grown in containers, most of which blooms mid and late spring, was used to replace early blooming container grown Narcissus. Some bloomed the second year, and some didn't. It was determined the Allium bulbs are best planted in the ground. There is a large variety of Allium ranging from just a few inches tall to 4 feet and in all colors. They are great companions for our roses, because the slight garlic scent helps repel aphids and other insects. Pre-cooling is recommended.

Several mid-spring and early summer flowering bulbs were grown in containers to replace the earlier blooming bulbs. Watsonia, Anemones, Freesias, Crocosmia a very striking and beautiful arching stem with tiny orange red tubular blooms and Chasmanthe, resembling Crocosmia. The Watsonia is best planted in the ground but will take over if allowed. The Crocosmia and Chasmanthe became too confined in the container. They bloomed the first year, but because of abundant bulb production they became over crowded and did not bloom the following year. The Anemones and Freesias were great in borders, but I had a low percentage survive more than 2 years in containers.

The most successful mid-spring and early summer bulbs were Calla Lilies, Cannas, Oriental Lilies and Asiatic Hybrid Lilies which are all excellent in containers, in fact you can leave them in the same container for 2 or 3 years before re-potting is necessary. If grown in the ground, they can be left indefinitely.

We are constantly trying new varieties of bulbs, and feel very confident in saying there is an abundance of bulbs for containers or in-ground planting that will delight you as companion plants to your roses. Short-lived early annuals such as Pansies, Lobelia and Snapdragons and perennials like Cone Flowers, Blackeyed Susan and Delphiniums can always be used in your rose beds, but in addition, use bulbs that give such a spectacular showing and can last several years.

