



It is Time to Plant Bulbs for Spring Color

Add beauty to your yard by planting flowering bulbs now. The burst of early spring color arouses hibernating gardeners from their sleep.

Bulbs may be purchased from mail order sources, local nurseries, or from discount stores. Mail order offers the largest selection and a chance to shop for the best price. Since you will not see the bulbs before shipment, it is important to purchase from a reliable company. The Garden Watchdog at <http://davesgarden.com/products/gwd/> provides customer evaluations of most mail order nurseries.

If you are shopping at local stores, examine the bulbs carefully. Moldy, diseased, dry, damaged, cut, soft, or rotted bulbs will probably die in the ground. Bargain and close-out bulbs should be checked especially carefully for damage; sometimes such bulbs have been stored at improper temperatures and may not sprout. Bulbs should be firm, healthy looking, and heavy for their size. If there is any doubt, purchase only a few bulbs and cut one in half. You should be able to see a young plant in the center. Buy the largest size bulbs available; these will produce the largest flowers next spring. Buying large bulbs is especially important for tulips; you may get by with smaller daffodil bulbs if you are using them for naturalizing and can wait a few years until they fully mature.

Plant spring flowering bulbs from about mid-September to mid-October. Choose a sheltered site where spring frosts are less likely to injure tender young growth; later growth and flowers can handle a light or moderate frost. A sunny spot is best, although many early flowering bulbs will go dormant before trees leaf out and shade them. Almost all bulbs require well drained soil. Avoid areas where there is standing water, as the bulbs may end up rotting. Add liberal amounts of compost or well rotted manure, and work it in thoroughly in the top foot of soil. Avoid bone meal because this attracts skunks and voles in search of buried bones. Work in about 2 to 3 pounds of a general purpose fertilizer such as 5-10-10 per hundred square feet. This fall fertilizer application will result in larger flowers next spring and larger bulbs the next year. Plant at the required depth for the variety, pointy side up, half fill the hole with soil, and water well. Fill with soil to the top, rake smooth, water again, and mulch with 2-3 inches of organic material. Water again if the fall is very dry; be careful, since excess water can cause the bulbs to rot. Apply a second application of fertilizer in the spring just after flowering.

Spring flowering bulbs have the most landscape impact if they are planted in groups or in masses, rather than singly or in rows. Smaller bulbs should be planted in masses of 50 or more to have the most visual appeal.

By choosing cultivars that bloom in different seasons, your garden may be in bloom with spring bulbs for three to four months. Try planting some that bloom at the same time as your forsythia, flowering crabapple, or redbud.

Many bulbs can be naturalized so that they bloom each year and increase in number. Toss them out onto the lawn and plant them where they land. Hyacinths and tulips are best treated as annuals; they tend to flower well for the first season and most decline rapidly after that.

After flowering, remove the faded flowers before they go to seed. Producing seed robs energy from the root system and results in smaller bulbs next year. Do not remove the leaves until they have turned completely yellow and are starting to die back. Do not tie or braid the leaves, as this reduces photosynthesis. The plants do need the green foliage to manufacture food for making healthy bulbs and producing next year's bloom. Fading foliage may be hidden by planting annuals or perennials amongst the foliage; be careful not to dig too deep when planting, so that the bulbs are not injured.

Flowers may decrease in size after a few years, indicating a crowded condition. Wait until the leaves have just turned completely yellow and carefully dig up the bulbs. Shake off the soil. Separate the bulbs, discarding any that are diseased or very small. Replant immediately. The bulbs can also be washed off, dried completely in a shady spot, and stored in shallow containers in a dark, cool, dry spot until fall planting time. Replanting of daffodil bulbs should probably be done every four to five years.

Squirrels love to dig up and eat tulip bulbs (but not daffodils, because they are poisonous). To protect the bulbs after you plant them cover the area with a sheet of chicken wire and hold it down with stones or bricks. Chicken wire holes are large enough that you can leave it in place as the plants grow. If you use hardware cloth it must be removed when the tulips start to come up.

Good Luck with your spring gardens,
Happy Gardening, Joe Baltrukonis