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Time to Plant Spring Flowering Bulbs

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A wonderful fall activity that will reward you with loads of color next spring is planting bulbs. There is such a diversity of choices ranging from early blooming crocuses to sunny daffodils and from heavenly scented hyacinths to aristocratic tulips to name a few. Probably the most difficult part of growing bulbs is trying to decide which ones to plant.



Since many bulbs will come back year after year, put a little effort into site preparation and effective placement. As do many garden plants, bulbs enjoy a sunny, well-drained site. Areas that retain water over the winter because they are low-lying, poorly drained or located under the dripline of a building are to be avoided. The bulbs will most likely rot and you will be disappointed with the results. Camassias are the only bulbs I know of that tolerate wet feet.

Use spring flowering bulbs to border the front walkway or driveway, as a foreground planting for your foundation shrubs, interplanted with perennials, or in beds by themselves. Combine bulbs with complementary colored spring blooming perennials or foliage plants. Stick a few peach tulips amid low growing 'Silver Mound' artemesia or tall purple drumstick alliums with taller 'Silver Queen' artemesia.

Try some pink or red multi-stemmed tulips with white candytuft, grape hyacinths with creeping phlox, or wood hyacinths among perennial vinca. Underplant your forsythia with blue or purple dwarf netted irises or your flowering crabapple with white daffodils. The possibilities are only limited by your imagination.

You do need to take into account blooming times. This is where a garden diary comes in handy. Tulips and daffodils, in particular, come in early, mid-season or late varieties. Usually blooms last for 2 weeks. Exceptionally warm springs will shorten the length of time bulbs remain in bloom while in cooler springs the reverse is true.

Quite a few species of bulbs work well for naturalizing. That means that they will eventually spread covering larger and larger areas with their blooms, if not kept in check. This may look especially appealing in some areas of your

property. Among those suitable for this purpose are daffodils, chionodoxa, grape hyacinths, scilla, wood hyacinths, crocuses, snowdrops, winter aconites and the smaller alliums. Very early bloomers can even be planted in lawns as long as the grass is not cut for at least 6 weeks after they have flowered. These early bloomers are important sources of pollen and nectar for bees and other insects so tuck a few around your property.

The earlier in the fall you can plant your bulbs, the better chance they have to take root before the ground freezes. The development of embryonic leaves and flowers as well as roots begins as soon as they are set in the ground.



While it is true that your bulbs have all the food they need for next spring's flowers already stored inside of them, good fertility is essential for healthy plants and blossoms in future years. Bonemeal used to be the fertilizer of choice for bulbs but a change in its processing has removed most nutrients except for phosphorus. It can still be used as long as a source of nitrogen and potassium is provided. Without a soil test, use a general synthetic or organic garden fertilizer or even one designed for bulbs. Follow the directions on the package.

Fall is the most important time to fertilize bulbs since the nutrients can be taken up by the developing roots. Fertilizer may also be applied in the spring but do so as soon as the new growth emerging. Later when the plants are flowering, they are already starting to go into their dormant summer stage.

Also, when planting work in a little fertilizer into the bottom of your planting holes. Phosphorus especially moved downwards slowly in the soil so it makes sense to put it in the root zone when you bet the chance.

If the soil pH is somewhere around 6.5, most bulbs are happy. Limestone is used to raise the pH of the soil. Once the pH is where it should be, a maintenance application of 5 pounds of limestone per 100 square feet can be put down every 2 to 3 years.

Plant bulbs at least 3 times their diameter deep. So a bulb that is 1 inch in diameter would be planted 3 inches deep. Tulips will last several years if planted even deeper, say to 8 inches or so. Do leave the foliage to yellow and ripen next spring after the bulbs have bloomed. Although it may look unsightly, time is needed for the food manufactured by the leaves to be translocated back to the bulb. Judicious placement of annuals and perennials can do a lot to camouflage the dying foliage.

If you have questions on planting bulbs or have questions on other home or garden topics, contact the UConn Home & Garden Education Center, toll-free in CT, at (877) 486-6271, visit us at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or call your local Cooperative Extension Center.