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## Planting and Forcing Spring Flowering Bulbs

*By Carol Quish, UConn Home and Garden Education Center*



Fall is normally the time for finishing up in the garden after a season of planting and harvesting. But, with that little extra effort of planting bulbs now, spring will seem like it is just around the corner. Bulbs can be planted both in the ground and in pots for forcing inside during the late winter and early spring when colorful flowers are needed most.



Spring bulbs for planting outside in the fall that do well in the northeast are tulips, daffodils, crocus, scilla, snowdrops, grape hyacinths and hyacinths. Purchase from a reputable plant seller as they know how to transport and handle the bulbs to keep them healthy. A few days in a hot tractor trailer at temperatures over 100 degrees can kill or distort the flower inside each bulb. The saying is true, 'you get what you pay for'.

True bulbs have a basal plate at the bottom where the roots originate. Above the basal plate are concentrically arranged leaf scales, wider at the bottom where they connect to the basal plate and thinner at the top, coming to a point creating a tear-drop shape. Always plant bulbs with the pointed end up.

Inside those leafy scales are stem tissue protecting the already developed flower bud in the center. In the true bulb group are tulip, daffodil, hyacinth, scilla, oriental lilies, netted iris and snow drops. All of these bulbs are hardy in Connecticut and will need to be planted early to mid-fall to allow for root establishment before the ground freezes. Locate bulb beds on a site with part to full sun and well-drained soil. Have a soil test done to determine soil pH and nutrient levels. Bulbs need phosphorous for good root development. If phosphorus is needed, work it into the top six to eight inches of soil for good accessibility by the roots. Bone meal or superphosphate are both sources of phosphorous.

Without a soil test, 4 cups of 10-10-10 or a similar fertilizer per 100 square feet can be worked into bulb beds before planting. A rule of thumb for planting is to place the bottom of the bulb two to three times the height of the bulb. Larger bulbs of daffodils, hyacinths and tulips will be put in a hole eight inches deep. Smaller bulbs would be planted three to four inches deep. With bulbs where the pointed end is not obvious, plant them sideways. Water the bulb bed

after planting to settle the soil and encourage root growth. Continue to apply one inch of water once per week via rain or hose. Lightly mulching the bed will help to protect the new plantings.

After bulbs bloom next spring, leave the green foliage and only cut back the faded flower and its stalk. The green leaves are the food factory making carbohydrates to store in the bulb for the following year's flowers. If you cut them back too early, the plant will not bloom the next year.

If you have animal pests that bother your bulbs, take some precautions. Reputedly hot pepper flakes sprinkled over the bed will deter squirrels from digging them up. So will commercial animal repellents sprayed on the soil. Soak bulbs in a commercial liquid animal repellent that adds a layer of bitter tasting chemical to the bulb. One bite and that little rodent learns to stay away. Treat tulips and crocus with these repellents. Naturally deer resistant bulbs are daffodils, scilla, snowdrops, grape hyacinth, hyacinth and alliums.

Forced potted bulbs will bloom earlier than they naturally would if planted outside in the ground. This can be done by mimicking nature to provide the required amount of time the bulbs will need to be exposed to cold temperatures that each species of bulb needs to trigger their internal clock to come out of dormancy. Then given some warmth from our homes or a greenhouse and they will start to grow. Tulips, daffodils, hyacinths and grape hyacinths, and scilla and crocus all respond well to forcing.

You will need top quality bulbs from a reputable supplier, containers, planting medium and a calendar. Timing is important for forgotten pots will not produce well. Use heavy containers so top-heavy plants will not topple over and be sure there are drainage holes in the bottom. Place at least two inches of moistened container mix in the pot before positioning your bulbs. Fill the container to within a half inch of the top of the pot. The larger bulb species can poke out of the soil a bit. Smaller bulb species should be completely covered. Water thoroughly, letting excess water drain out. Do not let pots sit in water at all.

The bulbs will need a chilling period for 12 to 16 weeks to give them a rest period and to initiate flowering. Keep the potted bulbs at 35 to 50 degrees F either in a refrigerator which contains no fruit as ethylene gas given off by fruit can retard bulb growth. Pots can also be placed outside in a spot where they are accessible, such as a cold frame or in a rodent tight container in a shed. Cover with leaves or straw for extra protection.



The goal is to provide the needed cold period while being able to retrieve them to bring inside when the ground is frozen and there is possibly a foot or more of snow covering. Mark your calendar to bring them inside after 12 to 16 weeks and set in a cool spot of 50 to 60 degrees F for first week. Begin watering as you see growth start. After this one week, move them to a warmer room and place in bright spot near a window, rotating the pot to keep the stems straight. Provide sticks and twine for support if needed. In about four weeks' time, blossoms should open.

For more information on planting bulbs, or for other horticultural topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at [www.ladybug.uconn.edu](http://www.ladybug.uconn.edu) or contact your local Cooperative Extension center. All images by Susan Pelton, UConn Home and Garden Education Center, 2018.