

Planting Bulbs in the Fall

By Teresa Gaffner

A bright and beautiful garden can be had in the coming spring by planning ahead and planting bulbs now. November is the perfect time in Zone 6 to gather up your garden tools, a variety of spring blooming bulbs and some top-quality mulch and head back out to your garden beds.

Bulbs can be divided into two main types: spring and summer. This article will be about spring bulbs which are also called 'hardy' bulbs and they are planted in the fall, spend the winter under the ground, where they develop a strong root system, and finally bloom in the spring. These bulbs need several weeks of cold temperatures to break their dormancy and flower to their full potential.

Some common spring bulbs are daffodils, hyacinths, crocuses, and tulips. The term “bulb” often refers not only to true bulbs, but also plants with tuberous roots, tubers, corms, and rhizomes. The information here can be applied to all of these. With a little basic knowledge, anyone can grow beautiful bulbs.

Purchasing Bulbs

You may not know it, but you are probably already familiar with an allium bulb if you have ever purchased an onion, shallot, or garlic in the grocery store. They are tear-shaped bulbs with tapered tops and visible roots on the bottom. You want to look for the same quality characteristics when purchasing a flower bulb as you would an onion.

- Bulbs should feel firm to the touch, not soft or spongy.
- Choose bulbs that are free of disease, mold, or severe damage.
- At the time of purchase, bulbs should show little or no root growth or sprouting. Lilies are an exception, as they often have fleshy roots attached.

You can store your bulbs in the refrigerator until you are ready to plant them but do not keep them in the crisper drawer with the fruits and vegetables. They (especially apples) can emit ethylene gas that can kill the plant within the bulb. Keep your bulbs on the top shelf of your fridge in paper or mesh bags so that they can breathe. Do not use plastic bags as your bulbs may develop mold.

Planting Your Bulbs

Planting bulbs in November is the perfect time for the Tri-Cities area as the autumn weather is consistently cooler and there is a steady increase in rainfall. It is best to plant before the ground freezes so the bulbs can establish a vigorous root system that enable hardy development in the spring.

Before you plant, you will need a plan. Do you want formal garden beds or scattered across the lawn or under deciduous trees. As long as you ensure that your bulbs have good drainage and sunlight, you can plant them just about anywhere. Drainage is critical to keep bulbs from rotting. They like loamy or slightly sandy soil high in organic matter because it provides the drainage and nutrients they need. You can lighten heavy soil by working in compost. Bulbs also do well in raised beds or containers.

Most bulbs should be planted 3 times their height deep and three times their width apart, on center. On center means from the middle of one bulb to the middle of the next one. Depth is measured from the bottom of the hole to the soil surface. If planted too deeply, flowers will bloom late or not at all. If planted too shallowly, new growth may become exposed too soon and risk damage by cold temperatures. Check the instructions on the bulbs package for specific planting depths and bulb orientation.

Cover planted bulbs with 2 to 3 inches of organic mulch to help prevent weeds, hold moisture, and keep the ground temperature constant during changes in the weather.

Water well immediately after planting and if it's dry. Be sure the water makes it down to the bulb's roots. Cut back or stop watering altogether when the rainy season starts. You will also need to stop watering when the ground freezes.

The University of Tennessee (UT) recommends scattering a slow release 9-9-6 specific bulb fertilizer across the top of the planting area. This will ensure a steady supply of nutrients throughout the growing season from bulb planting to blooming. Be sure to read the label and follow directions.

If you live in an area with squirrels and other wildlife that may dig up and eat your bulbs, consider covering your planted bulbs with chicken wire weighed down with rocks or bricks.

If you are planting spring bulbs for the first time follow these guidelines from Dr. Sue Hamilton, former director of UT Gardens, “.Limit yourself to 3 colors at the most-and about the same number of species. Once you've chosen 3 colors, repeat them throughout the landscape..”. She also recommends planting your bulbs in groups of 12 for larger flowers and groups of 25 for smaller varieties. Planting in masses or drifts can have a better visual impact than planting in straight lines. Many bulbs will naturalize in an area and multiply, coming back year after year, so plan carefully and you can have years of enjoyment from one planting.

When your bulbs are finished blooming, leave them alone to die back naturally. The bulb needs its foliage as long as possible to store nutrients for next year. When the leaves are totally brown, remove them. Plant bulbs among perennials whose foliage returns in spring and will hide the dying foliage of the bulbs. Some good perennial companions are sedum, coreopsis, coral bells, hellebores, and bleeding heart.

A beautiful spring bulb garden does take a little planning and effort, but the results are well worth the work involved. If you are considering planting a spring bulb garden, check out the links below to the University of Tennessee publications where you will find in-depth information on everything discussed in this article.

Plants for Tennessee Landscapes: Bulbs for the Garden
<https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/D140.pdf>

Flowering Bulbs for Tennessee Gardens

<https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/documents/pb1610.pdf>

How do I ask a question?

If you have a question for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.

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