

Plant Summer Flowering Bulbs Now for a Splash of Summer Color

By John Hitchcock, Master Gardener

Last fall in the 10/29/2022 issue of the Johnson City Press, fellow Master Gardener Teresa Gaffner wrote about planting spring flowering bulbs for beautiful spring blooms. We hope that you followed her advice, and your garden is now flush with those spring flowers, with more to come as spring continues. Now the time has come to think about those summer flowering bulbs that will accent your summer garden.

When buying your bulbs, be sure they are firm and not flakey, dried out or feel hollow. Also, check to see if there is no mold on the bulbs. As with all plants, following directions on their labels will almost guarantee success.

Summer flowering bulbs should be planted in the spring to get established in the warm soil of summer and fall. When choosing your summer bulbs, use some of these considerations: sunlight requirements, susceptibility to deer, hardiness, drainage, and plant width/height. The University of Tennessee/Tennessee State University Extension (UT/TSU) has two publications, provided below, that list spring and summer flowering bulbs that grow well in this area. These publications are in a spreadsheet/matrix form with all the above considerations listed as well as some cultivars or variants that will do better in our area.

Some bulbs that are easily obtained at bargain stores may not be hardy enough for this area, such as the Elephant Ear, and have to be dug up in the fall to save them from the occasional frigid temperatures we experience here in northeast Tennessee.

There are bulbs that can be planted in shady areas, such as Red Spider and Hurricane Lilies. Part sun/shade bulbs include dahlias and many species of lilies. Be aware that after the blooms are gone, the plant uses the green foliage to store energy for next year's flowers. So please refrain from chopping them down after the flowers have gone away. Once the stalks have turned brown, they can be cut. You may see the term 'ephemeral' when reading about flowering bulbs. This simply means that the foliage will die back when the conditions are not right for growth. An example of this is the grape hyacinth. You will see them in bloom this time of year then die back as the weather warms up to summer temperatures. These plants make an excellent ground cover since they grow quickly and attempt to cover whatever area they are in.

If you are new to bulbs, we advise to start small for the first time and carefully plan where you set them out. Some of these plants will tend to spread and take over areas where they may choke out other desirable plants. Grape Hyacinths spread easily to point where they could almost be labeled as invasive if not controlled. Lily of the Valley will spread more slowly although the sweet aroma from these plants is worth it. Iris will do the same if not thinned every two years or so.

When considering drainage, some bulbs do better than others in damp soils. The iris likes a little damper soil than the crocosmias.

Please give these UT/TSU Extension and the other publications a read when planning to set out your bulbs, for fall or spring planting. These documents are written using science -based research so that that Tennessee gardeners will have success in their gardens.

“Plants for Tennessee Landscapes: Bulbs for the Garden”, January 2021.
<https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/D140.pdf>

“Flowering Bulbs for Gardens Tennessee”,
<https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/documents/pb1610.pdf>

“Planting bulbs, tubers and rhizomes”, 2018 <https://extension.umn.edu/how/planting-bulbs-tubers-and-rhizomes>

How do I ask a question?

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