

Fall Bulb Planting (published 2025-08-30)
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In the valleys and ridges of Northeast Tennessee, autumn's cooler temperatures and soft soil signal one of the most important—and often overlooked—gardening seasons: fall bulb planting. While most people think of spring as the time to dig, plant, and plan, it's in fall that gardeners set the stage for some of the earliest and most spectacular blooms of the year. For residents of USDA Zone 7, fall is the ideal window to plant hardy spring-flowering bulbs that need a period of winter dormancy to perform at their best.

The key reason to plant bulbs in fall is to give them the cold exposure they need to flower properly. Many of our favorite spring flowers—tulips, daffodils, crocuses, and hyacinths—require a chilling period of 12 to 16 weeks, with soil temperatures consistently between 35- and 45-degrees Fahrenheit. This cold spell triggers essential hormonal changes inside the bulb, preparing it to produce flowers once warmer temperatures arrive. In Northeast Tennessee, the optimal time to plant these bulbs is from mid-October through late November, while the soil is still workable but no longer warm enough to encourage early sprouting.

Some of the most popular bulbs for fall planting include daffodils, which are among the most dependable and deer-resistant, and tulips, which come in a dazzling array of colors but often behave more like annuals in warmer zones. Hyacinths offer intense fragrance and bold color, while crocuses and snowdrops bring cheer to the garden as early as February. Alliums, with their globe-like blooms, provide dramatic height and visual interest later in the spring season. Grape hyacinths are another charming option, especially effective when planted in clusters for naturalized drifts.

Soil preparation is critical to the success of fall bulbs. Many parts of East Tennessee are known for dense clay soils, which can trap water and cause bulbs to rot. The solution is to loosen the soil to a depth of 8 to 12 inches and amend it with organic matter like compost, shredded leaves, or peat moss. These additions help improve drainage and soil structure. A small amount of bone meal or a phosphorus-rich bulb fertilizer can be worked into the planting holes to encourage strong root development through the winter months. The ideal soil pH for most bulbs is slightly acidic to neutral, around 6.0 to 7.0.

Bulbs should generally be planted two to three times as deep as their height, pointy side up. Spacing depends on the type and size of bulb but typically ranges from 3 to 6 inches apart. After planting, a thorough watering helps settle the soil and eliminate air pockets. Once planted, cover the area with a 2- to 3-inch layer of mulch to protect bulbs from temperature fluctuations and weed competition. Shredded bark, pine straw, or chopped leaves work well and will gradually enrich the soil as they break down.

Fall-planted bulbs are typically low maintenance. Once they're in the ground, they require little attention and are reliable in terms of hardiness and naturalization, especially in Zone 7's relatively mild winters.

One of the pleasures of fall bulb planting is designing a layered spring garden. By selecting varieties with different bloom times, gardeners can enjoy color from late winter well into May. Snowdrops and crocuses are the first to appear, followed by early daffodils and hyacinths. Mid-season tulips add vibrant color in April, and late bloomers like alliums extend the show into May. Planting a mix of bulbs ensures weeks of continuous blooms, which can be especially uplifting after a long gray winter.

While fall bulbs are typically reliable perennials, some like tulips, may decline in vigor after a season or two in warmer climates. These can be treated as annuals and replanted each fall for the best display. Others, such as daffodils and crocuses, tend to multiply over time, forming clumps that can be divided every few years to maintain their health and appearance.

For best results, gardeners should also remember to mark their planting areas to prevent inadvertently damaging bulbs by early weeding or planting of other perennials. Simple labels or garden maps can aid in preserving your money and hard work.

Planting in autumn is super simple. It's a one-time task that brings weeks of beauty in return. Once the bulbs are in and the mulch is laid, the gardener's work is done until the first signs of green peek out from the thawing ground, promising another season of life.

For anyone in Zone 7 who wants to enjoy a garden that comes alive the moment winter releases its grip, fall is the season to get to work. With just a bit of effort now, you'll be rewarded with vibrant colors and delightful scents that chase away the last chill of winter and usher in spring with style. Until next time, keep workin' th' dirt! “

Resources

“Planting Spring Bulbs During the Prime Months of Fall.”

https://extension.okstate.edu/articles/2023/spring_flowering_bulbs.html

“Plant Bulbs in the Fall for a Spring Celebration.” <https://extension.psu.edu/plant-bulbs-in-the-fall-for-a-spring-celebration>

“Timely Tips Series: Fall bulbs.” <https://www.uaex.uada.edu/publications/PDF/FSA-2096.pdf>

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