



## *Fall Bulbs for Spring Color*

Planting bulbs in fall for a spring display is one of the most exciting things a gardener can do. As if by magic, flowers appear in spring from bulbs planted in the waning days of fall, months before! They can really warm your winter heart!

### *CHOOSING A SITE:*

When selecting a site, keep in mind that bulbs need light and warmth to grow. Full sun is best. An area that will have sun in early spring but is shaded later as trees leaf out is fine for bulbs. It is always nice to have bulbs near the house and right by frequently used doors. Their appearance in early spring can be a daily reminder of the warmth to come. Bulbs can be mixed in with perennial gardens too. They will provide early season interest until other plants come on.

### *PREPARING A BED:*

Beds for bulbs should be rich in good organic matter. If your beds have poor soil you can add peat moss, compost, manure or any other good organic material to loosen and improve it. You need to improve only the top 6-10" of the bed if you are only planting bulbs. The planting area needs to drain easily, especially in spring. In a new bed, you should also spread a balanced fertilizer such as 16-16-16 or a commercially packaged bulb food. In an established bed bone meal in each planting hole is all that is needed. Use a small handful for each hole.

### *BUYING BULBS:*

When you buy bulbs, look for large, firm bulbs, free of any mold. Choose bulbs that appear smooth, firm and feel heavy for their size. A lightweight bulb is probably dried out and not viable while one that feels too soft to the touch has rot. Avoid bulbs that are already showing signs of green tip growth, (except paper white narcissus). Typically, bulbs are planted when fully dormant and the presence of green stems or leaves indicates the bulb has started active top growth before it has established a root system that is adequate to support that growth. That bulb may have been mishandled. And don't forget, deer love tulips but they do NOT care for daffodils or crocus!!!

Plant Land sells only first choice bulbs. Steeply discounted prices usually indicate second or third choice bulbs. The quality is seen in the display the following spring. The bulbs in bulk at the box stores may seem like a bargain but their quality is always second (or worse) rate.

### *PLANTING BULBS:*

Ideally, you should plant bulbs when the soil temperature drops to 50°- 55°. This usually happens around the end of September or the first part of October. If bulbs are planted too early, they will start to grow and can be harmed by cold weather. If you cannot plant when you first purchase your bulbs, store them in a paper bag in a cool, dry place.

The general rules for planting bulbs are that they should be planted four times deeper than the height of the bulb. For tulips and daffodils that means about 6-8". The pointed end of the bulbs always goes up. The only exception is Fritillaria, which need to be planted on their side so water can't rot the center of the bulb. Bulbs should be planted in groups or clusters. The larger the group, the better the show you will have in spring. For large bulbs, cluster 5 to a hole. Smaller bulbs should be planted in greater numbers, usually 6 to 9 bulbs, to give you a good display. Avoid planting in straight lines. Even a slightly staggered row in a narrow space will be more attractive.

### *POOR BLOOMING:*

When bulbs flower the first year and do well, but fail to flower or come up the second year the cause typically relates to the bulb not 'recharging' after flowering. Bulb foliage must be allowed to die back gradually after the flower fades. Those leaves are recharging the bulb in the ground for the next season. If bulbs do not come back at all, it could be poor drainage, especially in winter and early spring. A too wet spot will nearly always kill bulbs. Mice, voles and other ground critters also love bulbs and are the other reason bulbs fail to return. You may need to plant in wire cages to protect your bulbs from underground predators if you know you have the little critters in your yard.

### *MAINTENANCE:*

Like other perennials, bulbs need moderately fertile soil. To keep them growing and flowering, fertilize them lightly every year. Right after the flowers fade is the best time. Use 10-10-10 balanced slow release granular fertilizer. Scatter it on the ground and scratch it in with a hand cultivator. Do this while the leaves are still green so they can help the bulb absorb the food.

After the bulbs are through flowering, you must wait for the foliage to turn yellow before you remove it. You may cut it completely back at that time. Do not rush this phase. Bulb foliage can be cut back as soon as it starts to turn mostly yellow. The plants are storing energy for the next year's bloom and can be damaged by cutting the foliage too soon. This happens sometime in early summer so plan another display for a bulb bed for summer. Annuals make good follow-up planting for bulbs. Whatever you plant, be careful not to damage your bulbs when you are digging.

Bulbs typically live for a long time and do not need to be dug up very often. You may dig up bulbs to change a display and add plants. Bulbs reproduce more bulbs underground and you can dig up a clump and 'harvest' bulbs after 5 or more years. If a clump begins to flower poorly, plan to dig it up and revitalize it in the fall. Dig up the bulbs and recondition the soil as though it is a new planting. Replant the bulbs with new spacing. It may take smaller bulbs a season or two to flower but they will come back just fine. Daffodils are notorious for starting to produce less blooms as a clump ages, typically 7 years or more. Dividing them is a surefire way to get more flowers.

### *FORCING BULBS:*

To have beautiful flowers blooming in the dead of winter is surely a luxury but with bulbs, it is a luxury within anyone's reach. The principle behind forcing is to trick the bulbs into blooming by putting them through a series of climatic conditions that mimic the plants normal seasonal cycle. Bulbs should be planted in a good rich planting mix and not garden soil. A bulb goes through three stages before it blooms. The first stage is dormancy, which for outdoor spring bulbs takes place in summer weather. Bulbs that you purchase in late summer or fall for forcing will be dormant when you get them.

Stage two is the root development of the bulb. Keep bulbs at 48° for 8 weeks, then 41° for 4 weeks and at 35° for 4 weeks. You may also put the pots in the refrigerator but the three different cooling periods gives the best results. Without sufficient root development, bulbs may sprout, but the blooms may fall off before they open. If you use a refrigerator to chill your bulbs, they cannot be stored with apples. Apples produce ethylene gas, which will make the bulbs sprout right away.

The third stage is sprout development, which occurs after you bring the bulbs into a warmer place. After chilling, put the pots in a warm sunny window. Blooming should start within 4 weeks. Once they start to bloom, move them to cooler place so the bloom will last longer. You can allow the foliage to wither naturally after the flowers are done. Remove the bulbs from the soil and cure them by placing them in a warm, dry spot. We usually think of forced bulbs as 'spent' but you can try planting them in fall with new bulbs. With fertilizer they may take a season or two to recover and bloom again.