

Planning and Planting Spring Bulbs

Gaye Mara, Fairfax County Master Gardener

In return for very little effort on our part, bulbs can give us continuous bloom from late winter (snowdrops and species crocus will bloom in snow) until the first frost in fall. November is a great month to plant spring-flowering bulbs, and the summer-flowering lilies as well. The soil is cool enough to keep funguses and other diseases in check, but still warm enough for the bulbs to root before the ground freezes.

Bulbs and perennials complement each other well. Spring-flowering bulbs give us a burst of color early in the year, when most perennials are just barely starting to peek out of the ground, and continue blooming as the perennials gradually green up and fill out. Then as the bulbs die back, the perennials cover the fading leaves.

Lilies also are complemented by perennials. While the lily's blooms are stunning, the rest of the plant is rather scrawny and floppy. The foliage of perennials adds visual fullness and structural support, and hides any stakes or ties needed to prop up the lilies.

A lesson I learned the hard way: When planting bulbs among perennials, save your fall garden cleanup for later and leave the dead perennial foliage in place, so you won't forget where your perennials are and accidentally dig them up.

Advance preparation

Choosing the location. Most flowering bulbs require full or nearly full sun (5 or more hours of direct sunlight a day), so pick a sunny spot for planting. They also require good drainage -- bulbs rot easily in wet ground. If your chosen site is unimproved Virginia clay, which drains poorly, you will have to amend the soil. (For detailed instructions on soil preparation and other helpful tips, see "Flowering Bulbs: Culture and Maintenance" on the Virginia Cooperative Extension web site at <http://www.ext.vt.edu/resources> > Home Gardening > Annuals, Perennials & Bulbs > Bulbs.)

Calculating the number of bulbs. Measure the length and width of the site in feet, multiply for the square footage, and decide what bulbs you want to plant. Then, depending how densely you want to mass them, figure 4-9 bulbs per square foot for large tulips and daffodils, and 20-40 bulbs per square foot for the smaller bulbs like miniature daffodils and crocuses.

An alternative plan is to plant groupings of bulbs in vertical layers, with a layer of large bulbs planted below one or two layers of smaller ones. For example, a single crown imperial fritillaria (*Fritillaria imperialis*), a truly striking specimen, can be centered at the bottom of a one-foot diameter planting hole, with a layer of daffodils planted a few inches higher, and a third layer of grape hyacinths or crocuses a few inches above the daffodils. Leave some space between the groupings and you won't have to buy many extra bulbs.

Buying bulbs. Buy your bulbs from a good mail-order nursery or, if buying from a local nursery, choose bulbs that are large, plump and firm. Bulb size and quality do make a difference, since the complete plant (in miniature) is already formed inside the bulb. Along with the bulbs, buy some 5-10-10 fertilizer and bone meal if you don't already have them in stock.

Also buy something to prevent the bulbs from becoming dinner for squirrels or voles (these critters relish most bulbs other than daffodils, which are toxic): chicken wire to lay over the planted bulbs, or a repellent to pre-coat them or add to the soil along with them. Tulips are a special delicacy -- no sooner do I hang up my trowel after planting them than the neighborhood squirrels move in and start digging. (A gardening colleague told me she lays winter firewood over her tulip bed as soon as she plants it; by spring the firewood is used up, but the tulips are protected in the meantime.)

Storing bulbs. Many bulbs can be held for several weeks in a cool (below 65°F), dark garage or basement before planting. Virginia Cooperative Extension advises, however, that lily bulbs are never dormant and should be planted immediately.

Planting

Arranging the plants. Space the plants in the garden according to nursery directions -- or, in general, 4-6 inches apart for tall tulips and daffodils and other large bulbs, and 1-3 inches apart for smaller ones. It's easiest simply to arrange the bulbs on top of the soil in your desired pattern and then plant them where they lie. For a more natural effect, scatter them over the ground by tossing them out a handful at a time.

Digging the planting hole. Purchased bulbs usually come with instructions for both planting depth and horizontal spacing. Lacking that, a good general rule of thumb is to dig the planting hole three times as deep as the diameter of the bulb. It's important to plant bulbs deeply enough to avoid frost heaving in winter. Hybrid tulips in particular benefit from planting as deep as 10 inches for extra protection from our summer heat (not to mention hungry squirrels).

In each planting hole, break up the soil at the bottom a bit for better drainage and root penetration. Mix in a little 5-10-10 fertilizer and bone meal, add a little more soil, and set the bulb on top (the bulb shouldn't be in direct contact with the fertilizer). Then fill the hole with the remaining soil and tamp it down. When all the bulbs are planted, cover the soil with a 2-4 inch layer of fine organic mulch such as ground leaves or pine bark. This will stabilize the soil temperature over the winter and protect the bulbs from alternate freezing and thawing, which can damage or kill them.

Fall/winter care. After planting, our natural rainfall may be sufficient for root growth. But until the ground freezes, in dry weather water the bed deeply once a week to promote good root development.

Finally, pat yourself on the back, put your feet up, and look forward to spring! It will be here before you know it.