

A Primer on Spring Flowering Bulbs

The spring-flowering bulb display at your local garden center is like a visit to the candy store. Crate after crate, bin after bin of various bulbs hold promise to a glorious show of spring color. Mail order catalogs start to arrive in mailboxes by late summer and web sites tout their selections, enticing us to order now! Confused about what you should buy? How to use it in the landscape? What blooms when, what color, what height? Help is on the way. Read on for answers to these and other questions.

Bulb Bloom Calendar

Confused about when certain bulbs bloom? Keep in mind; growing conditions in your area will influence the bloom times, earlier or later, in this proposed calendar.

February/March

❖ Snowdrops, *Galanthus sp.*, produce delicate white blossoms that pop up through the snow. This low grower (heights of 4-8") should be planted along walkways and woodland areas that will encourage the bulbs to naturalize. Best planted in light, dappled shade in fertile, moist, yet well-drained soil. An early bloomer not favored by deer!

❖ Winter Aconite, *Eranthis*, is one of the first bulbs to bloom in the garden with yellow, buttercup-shaped flowers. *Eranthis* is low growing, only 4 to 6 inches tall. It's best to plant amid deciduous trees and shrubs massed along walkways and woodland areas for best effect. Prefers fertile, moist and well-drained soil conditions. *Eranthis* is excellent for naturalizing.

❖ Glory-of-the-Snow, *Chionodoxa*, produces sprays of star-shaped flowers in shades of blue, pink or white. Plant in sun or light, dappled shade areas that have well-drained soils. Use along walkways, borders or in rock gardens to appreciate its low growing (6-8") habit. *Chionodoxa* is wonderful for naturalizing.

❖ *Anemone blanda*, Windflower, produces beautiful daisy-like flowers in vivid shades of pink, magenta, amethyst, blue or white; some are multicolored. This low grower (up to 6") is useful in rock gardens, foreground of borders, or woodland areas where it will naturalize. Plant in sun or light, dappled shade in fertile, well-drained soils. Helpful hint: Soak tubers in water overnight

❖ *Iris reticulata*, dwarf iris, produces beautiful fragrant flowers in varying shades of blue; it grows 4 to 6 inches tall. Plant selected varieties in full sun and well-drained soil. Ideal for rock garden use.



March/April

❖ Dutch Crocus, *Crocus vernus*, produces flowers in shade of purples and white. A perennial favorite, this low growing bulb is best planted in masses in well-drained, sunny locations to create a carpet-like effect.

❖ Daffodils, *Narcissus*, provide so many choices for the gardener! Interesting colors and combinations of; fragrance; flower shape; multiple blooms per stem are just a few of the options to select from. Proper planning should allow for weeks of blooms to enjoy. Plant daffodils in fertile, well-drained soil in sunny or dappled shade locations. Depending on the selection,



continued on next page ►

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daffodils can be used in rock garden, borders, massed plantings and containers. Another plus: they can be forced for indoor bloom during the winter months.

❖ Grape hyacinths, *Muscari*, are available in shades of blues or white grape-shaped flowers on 4- to-8-inch stems. Plant in sunny locations that have fertile, well-drained soils. Useful when interplanted with other bulbs like tulips and daffodils or as edging for walkways or borders.



Bulbs make good companions. Grape hyacinth, *Muscari*, is interplanted with *Fothergilla gardenii* for early interest in the border.

❖ Hyacinths, *Hyacinthus*, are planted for their fragrance.--Locate these bulbs where you can catch their scent! Use in masses of 3-5 bulbs. Hyacinths grow 8-12 inches tall. Plant bulbs in full sun and well-drained soil. Buy extra for indoor forcing. Available in many colors including pinks, yellow, whites, purples.

April/May/June



❖ Tulips, *Tulipa sp.*, come in a variety of colors, heights, flower types--Endless choices, yet one for every garden. Certain tulips can bloom earlier than the April/May

timeframe suggested. Tulips definitely have their place in herbaceous flower borders. Low-growing types do well in rock gardens, while larger varieties are easily incorporated in flower borders. In addition, consider using tulips in containers. Buy extra bulbs for indoor forcing and enjoyment. A big no-no with tulips (and for any other bulb, for that matter) NEVER plant in straight lines! Always group in multiples of 3-5 or more bulbs for best effect. Grow tulips in fertile, well-drained soil in sunny locations in the garden.

❖ Crown Imperial, *Fritillaria imperialis*, is deserving of its common name! Clusters of orange-red or yellow bell-shaped flowers perch atop stems that grow from two to four feet tall. Plant in the background of herbaceous flower borders in groups of 3-5 for impressive results. *Fritillaria* thrive in full sun and soils that are rich, yet well drained.

❖ Giant onion, *Allium giganteum*, produce round heads of purple florets that sit on top of 30 to 40 plus-inch stems that bloom later in spring. Giant onion is useful in borders and containers when planted in sunny locations that provide fertile, well-drained soils.



Allium giganteum adds color and interest to the spring-blooming flower border. Flowers and stems of this plant can be used in dried flower arrangements.

continued on next page ►

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Selecting Bulbs

- ❖ Select bulbs that are healthy and firm.
- ❖ Place bags of bulbs in a cool, dry, well-ventilated area.
- ❖ Space out the bags if you bought a lot; better to not stack bags on top of each other.
- ❖ Inspect bulbs periodically and discard any that show signs of decay.
- ❖ Keep the labels with the bulbs so you'll know what you're planting.
- ❖ Always select bulbs that are hardy in your area to avoid disappointment.
- ❖ If you live in "deer country" choose bulbs wisely. Most references list *Narcissus*, *Galanthus*, *Allium*, *Chionodoxa*, *Fritillaria* and *Muscari* as being "deer resistant." To avoid disappointment, always check before purchasing.

Supplies needed for planting

- ❖ Bulb digger or trowel for smaller areas.
- ❖ Spade for larger areas; especially for naturalizing daffodils.
- ❖ Fertilizer to insure they get the nutrients, especially phosphorus/bone meal, they need.
- ❖ Labels to tell where and what's been planted.

Selecting and Preparing the Site

- ❖ When selecting the site, good drainage is essential; bulbs will not tolerate wet feet.
- ❖ Prepare the soil to a minimum depth of eight - ten inches in the planting beds. When planting in heavy soils, the addition of compost or rotted manure will

help improve soil structure and drainage. As an option, bone meal can also be incorporated into the soil. Bulbs generally prefer a soil pH of nearly neutral to slightly alkaline. If you are planting large areas, it's best to prepare the soil as one large planting area, as opposed to digging individual holes.

- ❖ If using a trowel or bulb planter for small plantings, an optional teaspoon of bone meal can be added and mixed into the soil before placing the bulb.

Planting

- ❖ There are differences of opinion on planting depths for bulbs. Some authorities say 2-3 times the diameter, others say 3-5 times the diameter. However, most agree if you have lighter soils, plant a little deeper. Spacing distance is generally 2-3 times the diameter of the bulb.
- ❖ If you are naturalizing a mixture of daffodils with different blooming times, put the bulbs in a bag or basket, mix them up and then plant.
- ❖ To provide your garden with a strong visual impact, it's advisable to group bulbs in clusters. Tulips, daffodils, and large bulbs should be massed in groups of ten or more, smaller bulbs like crocus and snowdrops in groups of fifteen to twenty or more. Avoid planting a straight line of soldiers. Mass bulbs for the greatest impact.
- ❖ If you are planting different types of bulbs, start with the largest bulbs first they will be deepest in the hole, then layer the others in the soil as you go up--think of it as making "bulb lasagna."
- ❖ Sketch a quick diagram of the garden to show where and what you've planted. If possible, keep labels tucked in by the bulbs.
- ❖ After planting, make sure you give the bulbs a deep watering.

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