

FALL PLANTING BULBS

For most of us, spring is about more than green popping leaves, green blades of grass and green shoots in the gardens. Spring bulbs add that first flare of color to our landscapes, be it in the reds of tulips, the yellows of daffodils or the purple of hyacinth.

Yet, many gardeners wait with trepidation to see if the bulbs they planted the previous fall will even poke through the soil. Proper bulb selection, good soil preparation, fertilizer, mulch and planting techniques will all help coax these signals of spring from their dormant states.

Definition, please

While we'll use the term "bulbs" broadly, here, it's worth noting that most people lump true bulbs, corms, rhizomes and tuberous roots into one category. True bulbs, such as tulips, hyacinth, daffodils, iris, snowdrops and allium, are teardrop shaped with a dark-brown, papery outer skin. Corms, which include freesia and crocus, are shorter and rounder than true bulbs, and they usually have a flat top and a concave bottom. Their outer skin is brown and hard. Rhizomes have a root-like stem that sends roots downwards and stems/leaves upwards; examples include iris and lily of the valley. Finally, we have tuberous roots, which are true roots and very similar to rhizomes.

While this will only cover spring-flowering bulbs that you plant in the fall, you can also plant other types of bulbs, such as daylilies and gladiolas, in the spring and summer. These summer-flowering bulbs can be either hardy or tender, meaning that some have to be dug up, since they won't survive a cold winter.

Choosing your bulbs

When: Most retailers begin to stock their spring-flowering bulbs around the end of August, and we'd suggest buying them as soon as they become available. This will allow you to store them in ideal conditions—a cool, dark, dry place with good air circulation—until it's time to plant.

What: Not all bulbs are alike when it comes to growing conditions, appearance and hardiness. When you're choosing your bulbs, keep the planting site in mind, as well as your hardiness



zone. Today's selection of bulbs extends far beyond your standard daffodils, hyacinth, iris, lily and tulips. Crocus, allium, snowdrops and scilla (a.k.a. Star of Holland) have all seen an increase in popularity in the last few years.

Size: Bulbs are graded by the grower based on their diameter; so you'll likely get the best performance from the ones that are large for their type. Since bulb size may differ by variety, be sure you're only comparing a bulb against others of the same variety.

Condition: Don't worry if the bulb's papery skin is a bit ripped; that won't affect its performance. However, do avoid bulbs with deep cuts, bruises or soft spots, as these injuries provide an invitation for disease. Likewise, try to avoid ones with significant signs of mold or rot.

Site selection

Bulbs are popping up in borders, perennial gardens, rock gardens, woodland settings, natural lawns and even in patio containers. Wherever you choose to plant them, you'll want to remember that most bulbs prefer well-drained soil and full sun. Avoid areas and containers where water tends to puddle. In addition, bulbs need warmth and light to trigger their spring growth.

While many people enjoy the natural look of planting bulbs in their lawns, it's crucial that you choose spots that won't need mowing during the early spring. (Once the flowers have faded, you'll need to allow the foliage to continue to grow for up to six weeks before it dies back; this ensures a strong return the following spring.)



Each issue, *Green Profit* organizes a ready-made class on livegood and hardgood topics in the form of a magazine page you can tear out, even giving it to customers who want questions answered, myths debunked and a reason to be in a garden environment, regardless of the season. You provide the customers and example products; we'll do the rest.

Site preparation

Soil preparation and fertilization are two of the most important things you can do.

- Start by loosening the soil at least 4 to 6 in. deep where you plan to plant bulbs. If you have excessively sandy soil, you can mix in peat moss or leaf compost to help retain more moisture.
- Next, you'll want to mix a fertilizer into the soil to provide nutrients. Compost or blood meal are common options; though, if wild animals are a problem, you might want to wait till spring to apply the blood meal, as it can encourage wild critters to dig up the bulbs. You can also use a standard 10-10-10 garden fertilizer or one specifically formulated for bulbs.

Planting

- Ideal planting times vary by the region you live in. The general rule of thumb: Plant bulbs before the ground freezes, and they'll do best if they have some time to establish roots before any extreme cold weather arrives. For example, in Zones 4 and 5, that means planting in late September/early October. In Zone 6, aim for mid October.
- Bulb-planting tools are great for planting bulbs one at a time, but if clumps and mass plantings are part of the plan, then a trowel or shovel allows for digging trenches or large holes. Bulb planting is easiest if you dig one large hole rather than numerous small ones.
- Creative planting will yield eye-catching results in the spring. Consider curving trenches, planting bulbs in layers, mixing bold colors such as red and yellow tulips, or planting different bulbs in mixed clumps. An example of layering: dig an 8-in. deep hole larger than a dinner plate and place several tulips, pointed end up, 6 in. apart. After covering with a thin layer of soil, alternately space grape hyacinth bulbs about 3 in. apart.
- Pay close attention to the depth requirements of different bulbs (see chart). Most packaging should contain this information. In extremely sandy soil, you may want to plant an inch or two deeper. A rule of thumb is to plant four times deeper than the bulb diameter—a 1-in. bulb should be planted 4 in. deep.
- Which end is up? Plant with the pointed end towards the surface. Often you'll have a flat bottom and roots to help you out. A few bulbs make it difficult to discern top from bottom; if all else fails, you can plant the bulb sideways and you'll still get normal growth.
- Once planted, give bulbs a thorough watering; since bulbs are often 6 in. or deeper, a "deep" watering ensures they actually get the moisture. If the fall season turns out to be particularly dry, you may need to provide additional watering so the soil doesn't dry out before it freezes.

Planting Depths

Examples of suggested planting depths for some common bulbs.

Plant	Depth (in.)
Allium	6–8
Crocus	3–4
Daffodil	6–8
Hyacinth	6–8
Grape hyacinth	3–4
Snowdrops	3–4
Tulip	6–10

- Adding 2 in. of mulch over the soil will help retain moisture/moderate soil temperatures.

Spring

- Once shoots appear in spring, it's time for another fertilizer application of blood meal, compost, garden fertilizer or specialty bulb fertilizer.
- The mulch layer can come off as the spring temperatures warm and threats of hard frosts disappear.
- As in the fall, dry conditions may warrant weekly waterings. Just remember that wet conditions promote bulb rot.
- Many of your spring-flowering bulbs make great cut flowers. Whether you leave the blooms outside or put them in a vase, try to leave as much of the foliage on the plant as possible. Cutting off spent blooms and keeping the foliage green will make sure the plant's energy goes into the bulb and not into seed production, ensuring a better bulb next year. Once the foliage yellows and dies back, feel free to cut it back.

The yearly cycle

You'll want to continue to fertilize each fall and spring. In fact, bulb experts in Holland maintain that while first-year bulbs can survive without fertilizer the first fall, it's imperative for continuing flower production after that.

After three or four seasons, you may need to divide or replace your bulbs if they're crowding each other or if they aren't performing well. As the foliage dies back after spring flowering, lift the bulbs from the ground, removing excess soil and roots. Store the bulbs in a cool, dry, well-ventilated place until it's fall planting time again.

Troubleshooting

- Deer and rodents can provide challenging growing conditions. In addition to the broad-range of control products on the market, look for bulbs that don't attract the pest you're having trouble with. For example, while deer love tulips, they aren't likely to devour daffodils. *Fritillaria imperialis* (a.k.a. crown imperials) is known for emitting an odor that repels rodents.
- If you've had trouble with no-show bulbs in their first year, it may be due to animals digging them up; bulb rot (caused by high nitrogen fertilizers, wet conditions or poor quality bulbs); or bulbs planted too late, too shallow (which may have caused them to come up too early) or outside of their hardiness zone.
- While first-year bulbs are known for flowering in most conditions, repeat performances may prove troublesome in shady areas or if the foliage gets removed from the plant before it yellows. But, if you follow the guidelines here, pay attention to variety requirements for the bulbs you purchase and give them the right place to grow, your spring will be blooming for sure. 🍀

—By Jennifer Duffield White, with special thanks to Rick Immerzeel, product specialist with De Vroomen Holland, Lisse, The Netherlands.