Bulb Planting for Spring Blooms

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Oct 30, 2006

Question: When is the best time to plant bulbs for Spring color?

Answer: The answer is NOW!

Bulb is a term loosely used to include corms, tubers, tuberous roots and rhizomes as well as true bulbs. They are broadly grouped into Spring-flowering (January-May) and Summer-flowering (June-September).

Many plants have a specialized root part for storing food. True bulbs are a leaf or flower bud encased in fleshy food storage layers called scales. But depending on the type of root they might be called corms, rhizomes, tubers or bulbs. The term bulb refers to any food storing bulbous underground plant growth. Most of the ones that are hardy in this area should be planted in October, or in time to get them into the ground while soil temperatures average 45-50 degrees.

Spring bulbs provide early color before most annuals and perennials bloom. Popular Spring bulbs include crocus, tulips, narcissus, daffodils, and jonquils. Choose your bulbs on the basis of color and flower size for specific purposes. Small ones will create a natural look and large ones stand out as specimen plants.

Summer flowering bulbs include amaryllis, tuberous begonia, caladium, calla lily, dahlia, gladiolus, lily and spider lily. These tender Summer flowering bulbs are usually planted in the Spring, after the danger of frost. Lilies are best planted in late Fall. Your Summer flowering bulbs will have to be dug and properly stored in a frost-free location over the Winter.

Most Garden Centers should be well stocked. Some of the rarer bulbs might only be available by mail order.

Plant bulbs in forests, fields, flower beds and containers, as long as they will get six to eight hours of sunlight. They can be planted in your lawn and still “season” in time to get cut down with the first mowing in Spring and not be seen again until the same time next year. (To season means that the leaves turn brown or yellow and the plant has produced and stored enough food for next year.) Early daffodils and crocuses are often planted in this way. Trees do not block sunlight from early bulbs if they season before the arrival of heavy foliage.

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Most do fine without supplemental fertilizer, but they do need light soil. The better aerated and drained, with good moisture holding qualities, the healthier the plant.

To prepare a planting area, spread a three inch layer of compost. Compro is a good material for bulb beds if you do not have your own compost. Rototill the soil deeply (12-15 inches) digging in the organic material.

If you are planting in a lawn, use a handful of Compro in each hole. Bulb planting tools are readily available at most Garden and Home Improvement Centers.

Tulips usually do not produce enough food and would benefit from a balanced bulb booster fertilizer. It can be incorporated when tilling the soil.

Use bulb size as depth gauge, and plant about three times as deep as the height of the bulb. For example, if a daffodil bulb is three inches, plant it nine inches deep. For corms and true bulbs, place the pointed side up and the flatter side down. Water when planting, but be careful not to over water. Bulbs do not like wet feet.

Bulbs look best when planted in drifts or waves of similar color in multiples of eight or more of each variety. Plant your bulbs now and enjoy for many Springs to come.

Happy Growing,
Audrey Cooke
Master Gardener

For more information about horticulture or the Master Gardener Program in Frederick County, call the Frederick County Office of the Maryland Cooperative Extension, 301- 600-1596, or visit http://www.frederick.umd.edu/. Our mission is to educate Maryland residents about safe, effective and sustainable horticultural practices that build healthy gardens, landscapes and communities.