



A Bit About Bulbs

Night temperatures are cool, the air is almost crisp. The vegetable harvest is tapering off and green foliage is starting to change to beautiful shades of red and yellow. There are many signs that tell us that fall is here. But this year, instead of dreading a long, cold winter, why not make the most of this glorious season? Gardening is not finished—for that matter, it never is! There is always something to do, and right now is the time to plant spring-flowering bulbs.

Whether your preference is for naturalized or formal bulb plantings, on a small or large scale, keep kinds and colors together in generous groupings of a dozen or more. This shows them off to best advantage.

Bulbs planted crazy quilt fashion lose individuality. It's even less attractive to display them single file in weak looking rows.

Many gardeners like naturalized "drifts" of flowering bulbs. This means tossing handfuls of bulbs of a single kind where you want them to grow, and then planting them where they fall. Remember, shade is typically not a problem since deciduous trees do not have a canopy of leaves to block the sun in early spring.

No matter how you approach the task, in order to have a beautiful garden of spring flowering bulbs, you will need to start with soil preparation. You just can't expect anything to thrive in ground that must be broken apart with a pickax. Spread two or three inches of compost, peat moss, or leaf humus over the planting site, and then till or spade it under to a depth of eight inches or more.

Fertilizing when bulbs are planted is not critical, because embryo flowers initially obtain most of their sustenance from food already stored within the bulbs. If you wish to provide additional nutrients at planting time, a suggested rate is five pounds of a 5-10-10 analysis fertilizer per 100 square feet, after the bulbs are in the ground. If you want to use bone meal, keep in mind that it attracts dogs and rodents and use accordingly.

Depth of planting often depends on bulb size. Big ones such as tulip, daffodil, and hyacinth can easily go six inches deep and six inches apart. On the other hand, two to three inches deep and three inches apart usually is enough for crocus, grape hyacinth, scilla, chionodoxa, galanthus, anemone, puschkinia, winter aconite, and other dainty "lesser" bulbs.

Depth varies according to soil consistency. In loose, sandy loam, large bulbs can be set eight inches deep or more. In heavy clay that has not been properly broken up with organic matter, it is better to go no deeper than four inches.

Pointed end up is the general rule to follow. If you are dealing with a strangely shaped bulb species that doesn't seem to have a top or bottom, much less a point, just drop it into the hole and let it find its way. Bulbs planted upside down have the uncanny ability to right themselves. They don't turn somersaults; the roots merely work their way down and stems go up where they belong.

Purchase from reliable dealers to assure quality bulbs, which should be firm and heavy. Lightweight or softness could reflect disease or a loss of moisture. A quality bulb is a large bulb; it will produce larger flowers and more of them. The bulb should feel "heavy" and be firm to the touch. It should be free of gashes and cuts. Bulbs have an outer layer called a tunic, very similar to an onion. It's okay to buy bulbs with shattered or cracked tunics. It actually gives you a better look at the bulb.

Some bulbs, like daffodils, may have bulblets attached to one side or another or even both sides. This is a good thing, a bonus. There are small bulbs that have grown out from the original bulb, they will mature and make more blooms. This is how some bulbs naturalize or spread out from the original planting site.

The best time to plant is when the soils cool to 50 to 55 degrees. This usually occurs by mid to late September in Southern New Hampshire. If you plant the bulbs too early, they may begin to grow and poke through the surface. If you need a lift after this year's difficult growing season, go out and splurge on some bulbs. Next spring you'll be glad you did.

Call the UNH Cooperative Extension's Family, Home, and Garden Education Center Info Line toll free at 1-877-398-4769 for "Practical solutions to everyday questions". Trained volunteers are available to answer your questions Monday through Friday from 9AM to 2PM and Wednesday 5PM to 7:30PM.

By Margaret Hagen

The University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension programs and policies are consistent with pertinent Federal and State laws and regulations on non-discrimination regarding race, color, religion, gender, age, national origin, sexual orientation, disability, veteran status, or marital status. UNH, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, and New Hampshire counties cooperating.