

Plant Bulbs Now for Spring Color



Some types of narcissus will come back to flower year after year in our area. Photo by Mary's Plant Farm.

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If you are looking for some bright color in your early spring garden, consider flowering bulbs such as daffodils, hyacinths or tulips. Their intense colors are a great herald of spring.

Most local gardeners are familiar with daffodils and other members of the narcissus family. These perform well in this climate if given the right planting conditions, and, depending upon the cultivars chosen, will reliably come back every year. Others, like tulips and hyacinths require a little more effort. If you would like your bulbs to bloom reliably each year the daffodil or narcissus group is your best choice.

Tulips and hyacinths will also grow here but will need a little more effort. You must play a trick on 'Mother Nature'. In this case it will pay off. For best flowering, these bulbs require a period of low ambient temperature not normally experienced in our area. The gardener can simulate these conditions by refrigerating the bulbs for six to eight weeks before planting. Be careful, do not freeze the bulbs. Some local nurseries sell pre-conditioned bulbs. Be aware that tulips and hyacinths, unlike daffodils, when planted in our area do not bloom every year and should be treated as annuals. Remove them after they flower next spring.

Do not let this deter you from planting tulips and hyacinths. With proper preconditioning they work very well here as annuals, flowering spectacularly the first spring after planting. Tulips in particular put on an intensely colorful springtime show, unrivaled by any other spring flower. Hyacinths are noted for their intense fragrance.

Plant Bulbs for Spring Color

Whatever type of spring flowering bulb you should choose, plant them only after the soil has cooled. Mid December to mid January is recommended.

You should also consider other spring flowering bulbs which grow well here, such as Dutch Iris. They come in a variety of colors and make excellent cut flowers. Snowflakes, an easily naturalized southern version of "Lily of the Valley", and Paperwhites, a very fragrant white narcissus flower.

Select the right bulbs for your situation. If they are to be grown as annuals, as with tulips, select them for the desired color, shape and time of bloom. Hardiness in this case is not a problem since the bulb contains sufficient food for the blooming season. Fertilizing would be a waste. Bulbs that are planted as perennials for naturalizing will need fertilizer. Use a reasonably balanced fertilizer not too high in nitrogen. Do not fertilize too often or too heavily.

Bulbs grow best in full sun to partial shade. They need well drained soil since bulbs will rot in wet soil. It is important to properly prepare the planting bed. Don't just dig a small hole. Work the soil in the entire planting area until it is free of clumps. Plant the bulbs about twice as deep as the bulb is tall. Better too shallow than too deep. This will take advantage of the little cooling they will get in our mild climate. Make sure the bulb is planted up-right; this is usually the pointed end.

Mulch lightly during the winter months to avoid a moisture problem. Mulch moderately in the summer months to keep the bulbs from getting too hot. You can plant annual flowers in the bulb bed after they have bloomed, being careful to not disturb the bulbs, though.

For maximum effect bulbs are best planted in masses of single or closely related colors. Be aware that different varieties may bloom at different times and are of different heights, so it's best to stick with a single variety.

Enjoy the bright spectacle of spring flowering bulbs by planting this fall.

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