

Planting Bulbs

STORY BY KAREN M. ALLEY

Fall is for planting, and of course that includes spring-flowering bulbs! In the Carolinas we're often blessed with spying the first crocus popping out of the ground in late winter, and daffodils are in full-bloom by the windy days of March. If you're ready to add some color to your early spring garden, start planning now.

Preparing the Bed

Bulbs live and bloom in the same spot for many years, so good soil preparation from the very beginning is important in keeping your plants healthy. To prepare a new area, dig deeply, about 10-12 inches, to really loosen the soil. Then mix in peat, sand, compost, ground up leaves or some other form of soil additive. Bulbs like well-drained soil, and make sure you're preparing your bed in a sunny place. Remember, it can be underneath a tree because most bulbs will have completed their blooming cycle before the leaves grow big enough to create much shade.

Bulbs are also fun to plant in grassy areas. Here you will just prepare each hole as you go along, mixing the soil with compost or peat and a handful of sand.

Once the soil is ready it's time to place your bulbs. A general rule of thumb is to plant twice as deep as the height of the bulb. If you plant too shallow you could cause incomplete root damage, but planting too deep increases the chance of rotting.

After you've covered the bulb, sprinkle some fertilizer on top. Make sure you don't put it in the hole with the bulb. A good general fertilizer is 5-10-12. Then place a layer of mulch over your bed. This will keep the soil cool and moist throughout the winter.

Planting Strategy

Planning the look of your bulb garden is half the fun. Bulbs can be planted in a pattern, or massed for a natural effect. If you'd like a more formal garden, dig a separate hole for each bulb. To get a naturalized look, toss out a handful of bulbs and plant them where they land. You can do this either by digging separate holes under each bulb or digging one big hole and tossing a handful into it.

When planting a mix of bulbs, think about the size each flower will grow to as you plant. Place shorter crocuses in front, while taller daffodils and tulips should go in the back. You can also layer the bulbs, planting early-blooming flowers such as crocus in the same area as tulips, which bloom later.

As with many plants, bulbs will be on sale in garden centers well before appropriate planting time in the Carolinas. Find out your area's freeze date, and plan to plant 6 weeks before the ground freezes. You can keep bulbs in the refrigerator until it's time to plant.

Once you've planted your bed, add markers so you can remember what varieties you've planted, or draw a map of the bulb garden to help you remember what will come up in the spring.



Photo Courtesy of the Netherlands Bulb Co.

Common Favorites

Crocus. These little beauties are often the first glimpse of spring. Don't worry if they come up and then we happen to get a surprise late-season snow, they will survive and thrive. Crocus are especially beautiful when planted in masses, as many as 100-150 bulbs in one area.

Hyacinth. Coveted in France for their fragrance, hyacinth blooms provide a great perfume for your garden. Like other bulbs, these are most effective when planted in masses.

Tulips. For the Carolinas, tulips are usually best treated as an annual. They need a longer period of cold to create a bloom spike than other bulbs. But the effort of planting tulips each fall is well worth the colorful reward each spring.

- North Carolina Extension Service, www.ces.ncsu.edu
- South Carolina Extension Service, www.clemson.edu/extension
- The Garden Helper, www.thegardenhelper.com/springbulbs.html
- Terra Ceia Farms, www.terraceiafarms.com.

Sources