



Planting Spring Bulbs in Fall

Bulbs are truly some of the simplest of flowers to grow. They are also easy to care for and inexpensive. Plant in the fall and enjoy weeks of early spring color, fragrance and beauty.

It's essential that you purchase good, healthy, quality bulbs. Second-rate or bargain-priced bulbs will produce second-rate flowers and often, first-rate disappointment. Good bulbs generally produce flowers the first season after planting. The quality of flower is determined by the quality of the bulb you buy.

Spring flowering bulbs are not fussy about soil. They will grow in sandy or clay soil, as long as the soil drains well. If the soil is heavy, mix in sand or peat moss to a depth of about 1 foot. Waterlogged bulbs rot, especially when dormant. Rich soil is unnecessary because bulbs contain food they need to produce foliage and flowers in the spring. They are also forgiving when it comes to light. A spring bulb garden can be planted in either sun or shade. Some other tips:

- Plant daffodils and hyacinths 6 inches deep and 6 inches apart.
- Set the bulbs firmly in place with their pointed end up. Then, water liberally. Water again if a prolonged dry spell occurs during the fall.
- For best effect, plant bulbs in clusters of 12 or more. Space these clusters throughout the garden among shrubs, along walks or around trees.
- Avoid bulbs with blue or green mold spots. This is penicillium mold. It can severely damage hyacinth and tulip bulbs.
- Remove the seed pods after the flower is spent, but leave the stem and leaves. Allow them to turn yellow. They continue to produce carbohydrates that will strengthen the bulb.
- If the soil is heavy, use a sand mixture to back-fill over the bulbs.

Bulbs that grow well in Texas include daffodil or Narcissus, crocus, grape hyacinths, Dutch iris, ranunculus and anemones.

Some spring-flowering bulbs should not be planted in late fall, such as tulips and Dutch hyacinths. Where winters are comparatively mild, they require a cold treatment prior to planting. Tulips and Dutch hyacinths should be placed in the vegetable bin of the refrigerator for 45 to 60 days prior to planting. They should, however, never be frozen and should be planted immediately after removing them from cold treatment.

Forcing Bulbs

Bulbs that are good for indoor forcing include crocus, Narcissus, grape hyacinths, daffodils and hyacinths. Avoid using tulips or Dutch hyacinths that you have not pre-cooled for 60 days.

Pot the bulbs as soon as they become available. Prepare the soil by mixing equal parts of soil, peat and sand. Place a 1-inch layer of gravel in the bottom of the pot. Firm the soil around the bulbs, leaving the tips of large bulbs showing above the surface. Barely cover small bulbs and space them about ½-inch apart in the pot.

The newly potted bulbs should be stored at a temperature of 40 to 50 degrees F. Success with forcing bulbs depends upon their developing roots during the cold storage period. Keep the soil moist but not saturated. The vegetable drawer in the refrigerator provides excellent conditions.

After the cold storage treatment, place the bulbs in a cool, semi-lighted location. Gradually move to sunnier locations for good growth and color. Do not allow the bulbs to dry out at anytime during the forcing period.

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Q. When should spring-flowering bulbs be planted?

A. In the fall, from mid-September to mid-December. October is the best month. The natural chilling the bulb receives provides the stimulus for the flower buds to develop properly. It also allows for root development.

Q. How can you judge the quality of bulbs?

A. In general, they should be heavy and solid. A soft bulb may indicate internal rot. They should be free of bruises and cuts—these are ready sites for disease and insect invasion. Inspect the bulbs closely for signs of disease or insects. You will avoid many problems by planting clean, high-quality bulbs.

Q. How much light do spring-flowering bulbs require?

A. Most spring-flowering bulbs do best in full sun or filtered light. Inadequate light tends to reduce the size or number of flowers and can even prevent flowering in some cases. Most spring-flowering bulbs lose their foliage by late spring or early summer, and therefore can often be grown successfully under deciduous trees. (By the time the trees leaf out, foliage on the bulbs is declining.) Light shade and cooler temperatures can prolong the length of time the plant is in flower and reduce fading.

Q. What about soil quality?

A. Most authorities recommend sandy loams for bulbs, but you also can find many examples of bulbs thriving in everything from pure sand to clay. The key to success as far as the soil is concerned is drainage. Most bulbs are highly intolerant of poor drainage. In the landscape, drainage can be improved by adding various soil amendments, installing drain lines or growing in raised beds.

Q. How deep should bulbs be planted?

A. It depends on the size of the bulb and the soil type (heavy or light). As a general rule, planting depth (from top of bulb to soil surface) should be 2 to 3 times the greatest diameter for bulbs 2 inches or more in diameter, and 3 to 4 times the greatest diameter of smaller bulbs. Bulbs planted too deep may not be able to push through the soil. Planted too shallow, they are more susceptible to moisture stress.

Q. What is the proper spacing for spring-flowering bulbs?

A. It will vary according to the size and vigor of the bulb as well as the desired landscape effect. Tiny bulbs like grape hyacinth are planted about 3 inches apart. Large bulbs like daffodil might be planted 6 to 12 inches apart. The closer together that bulbs are planted, the sooner they will need to be dug and divided. On the other hand, if spaced too far apart, the landscape effect is spotty and less attractive.

Q. When do spring-flowering bulbs bloom?

A. "Spring" is not a precise time, and may actually extend over a period of weeks and varying somewhat from year to year and location to location. Early-, mid- and late-spring are sometimes used to more closely define the bloom time. Depending on the species, variety and micro-climate, blooming may occur from January to May. (Bulbs flowering January and February are sometimes referred to as winter-flowering. This term is also used to describe tender bulbs which flower *INDOORS* in winter.) Bulbs with southern exposures usually bloom earlier than those with northern exposure.

Q. When can the foliage of spring-flowering bulbs be removed?

A. Allow the foliage to remain until it withers and dies naturally (late spring to early summer). The longer the foliage remains, the longer the plant can photosynthesize and build up its food reserves for subsequent re-flowering. Premature removal can severely weaken a bulb, resulting in poor flowering and/or death. Unfortunately, the foliage of most spring-flowering bulbs becomes unsightly long before it completely dies, and many gardeners cut or mow it off. If you must remove the foliage, allow a minimum of 6 weeks after flowering before removal. Annuals and some groundcovers can be inter-planted with bulbs to hide deteriorating bulb foliage.

Q. When is the best time to dig and divide spring-flowering bulbs?

A. They can be dug and divided anytime when dormant (after the foliage dies and before new root growth begins in the fall). It is probably best to dig and divide just as the foliage matures and easily detaches from the bulbs. At that time, you know exactly where the bulbs are. Later, when the foliage is gone, you may not remember. The bulbs should be immediately re-planted or stored in a cool dry place until fall.