

Gardening with Bulbs

After a long, cold and dark winter, spring blooming bulbs signal that warmer days are right around the corner. Fall bulbs come in a large variety of colors, heights, and varieties, offering each gardener the ability to customize and create a display uniquely to their specific taste. Is there a more recognizable sign of spring than daffodils and tulips breaking through the frozen ground? While we plant dahlias and gladiolas in spring for a glorious summer display, hardier bulbs like crocus, tulips, daffodils, and muscari can be planted in September through early December and will bloom in the early spring months.

Naturalizing vs. Non-naturalizing Bulbs

If you are looking to plant bulbs once and enjoy beautiful flowers year-after-year, you will want to choose bulbs that naturalize. Naturalization is a term that means bulbs can be planted and left in the garden to multiply and look “natural”. Other bulbs (non-naturalizing) need to be dug up and stored in a cool dark place. While tulips are some of the more popular planted bulbs, the traditional tulip does not naturalize. There are smaller flowering tulips that will naturalize but their look is distinctly different than the widely recognized tulips we all know and love. Daffodils naturalize well in an area where you don’t trim foliage after blooming since the leaves provide food for the bulbs to store and be used in the coming summer months.

Planting

The best time to plant spring flowering bulbs is from September – November. Plant your bulbs “tip up” because the pointy part of the bulb is where the flower comes from. Since most bulbs require partial to full sun, you will want to make sure you choose the proper garden spot. In the PNW this can be critical as we have so many days of cloudy and gray skies. Full sun means the plants will get at least 6 hours of direct sunlight each day and partial sun would be 4-5 hours. Choose soil that drains well and add some compost to break up clay or sandy soils. Water your bulbs immediately after planting. If your soil is overly wet the bulbs will rot and are more susceptible to disease and mildew. The depth required to plant your bulbs will differ depending on the size of the bulb. A good rule of thumb for depth is 2-3 times the size of the bulb. Daffodils are often planted 6” inches deep while smaller bulbs like crocus must be planted shallower.

Fertilizing

Fertilize your bulbs when planting. A second round of fertilization can be done later, usually during the summer months of late June to early August. The bulbs themselves will also provide nutrients within the bulb itself. Think you want to trim the greenery back after the flowers die? Think again. The leaves are full of nutrition and continue to feed the plant long after the blooms are gone.

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Alliums

Related to chives, onions, and garlic, alliums typically bloom from May until late June. You will find a variety of sizes but the most popular is a tall variety called ‘Globemaster’. You can expect to reach heights to 4’ in showstopping purples, pinks, and white blooms. Alliums love full sun and the deer and the rabbits usually leave them alone. A naturalizing bulb that is a must for any garden.

Colchicum – Autumn Crocus / Saffron

While not a true crocus, these bulbs are part of the Iris family. Choose a full sun or partial sun area and plant them in August for September or October blooms. Typically, the pink or white blooms will appear before the foliage. Used for various pharmaceuticals, these plants are toxic, especially to cats. This bulb naturalizes well.

Crocus

These are some of the earliest blooming bulbs that enjoy both full and partial sun environments. Overtime, crocus will naturalize to your garden and they typically bloom in pink, purple, blue, yellow, orange and white flowers. The most popular crocus is called ‘Giant Mix’. You can expect a growth height of only 5” - 8” and have larger flowers than that of the snow crocus.

Daffodils (Narcissus)

When most people think spring bulbs they think of daffodils. Daffodils are hardy and after planted you can expect them to return year-after-year. Typically, resistant to deer and rabbits, daffodils are limited in colors to mostly yellow, orange, and white. With a cupped shaped flower that can be single, double, or split. Some are even fragrant. If you are just getting started planting bulbs, daffodils are a naturalizing bulb and are a great choice as they are simple to grow.

Fritillaria

Known to have “stinky” flowers, fritillaria can repel almost any destructive pests. What they lack in aromatic beauty they more than make up for in visual beauty. Incredible looking bell-shaped flowers that are upside down hanging clusters at the top of a single stalk. Plant these standouts in full sun and expect them to grow from 1’ to 4’. This naturalizing bulb is known to easily multiply in the right setting and blooms in red, orange, yellow, and deep purple.

Galanthus

Also known as “Snowdrops” these bulbs will typically bloom with snow on the ground. They prefer a woodland setting but will still grow in partially sunny areas. Growing between 4” and 10” tall, galanthus are pest resistant. When you see the pristine white flowers you know that we have turned the corner and spring is on the way.

Hyacinths

Beloved for their jewel tone colors and wonderful fragrance, hyacinths bloom in white, blue, purple, pink, and yellow. Plant them close to the door and allow your entire home to experience the aromatic scent. Remember to dig them up each season as they do not naturalize.

Iris – Bulbs

Unlike the rhizome variety of iris, this counterpart are available in fall in bulb form. The main difference is the bulb form of iris will bloom in very early spring. Foliage is generally thin and grass like. Varieties bloom in shades of yellow, bi-color blue and purple. This family includes Dwarf Iris, Dutch Iris, and Reticulated Iris.

Iris - Rhizome

Looking for a rhizome that comes in rainbow of colors? The rhizome iris is the choice. This type of iris has sword-like green or variegated foliage with an array of blooms of pinks, purples, yellows, whites, and blues. This rhizome is also versatile as it can be planted as early as late summer or wait until late fall. Some varieties will actually bloom twice each season. The most common iris is the ‘Bearded Dragon’ and you can expect a growth height of 2’ - 3’ tall. Other types of rhizome iris are Siberian, German, Japanese, and Louisiana.

Muscari

Also known as ‘Grape Hyacinth’, they are not related to the hyacinth family at all. Expect this bulb to spread rapidly and bloom in tones of blue, purple, and white. This is another bulb that is simple to grow and very dependable to bloom year-after-year. Looking for something that the deer and rabbits don’t typically eat...muscari is a great choice.

Tulips

The tulip family may be the most recognizable and largest family of the fall planting / spring blooming bulbs. Starting in February and continuing into June, tulips bloom in almost every color with many different types of flowers. Planting in rich and well-draining soil in full and partial sun areas will provide best growing results. Unlike other bulbs, deer and rabbits enjoy eating tulips so you may want to plant in containers or in areas that are harder for the critters to get to. If you are looking for something different, plant some ‘Parrot’ Tulips and see the attention they bring. Tulip bulbs do not naturalize and will require being dug up each year.

Early Season Blooming (February / March)

Chinodoxa
Crocus
Eranthis - Winter Aconite
Galanthus – Snowdrops
Iris danfordiae
Iris reticulata
Narcissus - Daffodil
Scilla peruviana
Scilla siberica
Tulip - Double - Early
Tulip - Emperor
Tulip - Greigii
Tulip - Kaufmanniana
Tulip - Single - Early

Mid-Season Blooming (March – April)

Anemone - Windflower
Chinonodox - Glory of the Snow
Corydalis
Erythronium - Fawn Lily
Fritillaria - Fairy Bell
Hyacinthoides - Spanish Bluebells
Hyacinths
Ipheion - Mexican Star
Muscari - Grape Hyacinth
Narcissus - Daffodil
Puschkinia - Squill Plant
Tulip - Darwin Hybrid
Tulip - Double - Mid
Tulip - Single - Mid
Tulip - Triumph

Late Season Blooming (April – June)

Allium
Anemone - Windflower
Camassia
Eremurus - Foxtail Lily
Iris - Dutch
Iris - German
Iris - Japanese
Iris - Louisiana
Iris - Siberian
Tulip - Darwin Hybrid
Tulip - Double – Late
Tulip - Fringed
Tulip - Lily
Tulip - Parrot
Tulip - Single – Late
Tulip – Triumph