

# Bulbs Are For Optimists

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Any gardener that plants bulbs in the fall anticipating they'll bloom in the spring is an optimist. It's an exercise in delayed gratification.

Most bulbs originated in the Middle East and they survived the dry climate by storing water and energy in the spring, then going dormant during the hottest part of the year. It took the Dutch years to get these bulbs to withstand colder temperatures and wetter climates. The Dutch now excel at the production of bulbs and this is where most bulbs come from today. This is not good news for us because our climate is more like the Middle East than Holland. Because of this we have to select bulbs carefully. In fact the species variety (unchanged by the hybridization to colder, wetter conditions) is a great choice for us.

Bulbs continue to exhibit their original behavior, using modified stems or roots to hold energy for the following year's bloom, absorbing the nutrients from their foliage as it dies, going dormant over the summer, fall, and into winter then blooming in the early spring. Knowing this you'll understand what you need to do to care for them. A few additional pieces of information will help: some bulbs prefer warmer climates than ours and they need to be removed before winter sets in (i.e. canna lilies). Some bulbs like it colder than we are and these may need chilling before planting or just wait until after the first frost to plant them (i.e. tulips).

Because bulbs are using their storage mechanisms to drive bloom it follows that the bigger the bulb the better the bloom. The bigger bulb also naturalizes or creates more bulbs better as well. Cheaper smaller bulbs are not a good buy. Ones with a hollow dried out feel aren't good choices either. I bought some crocus from a local big box store; they bloomed one year and I haven't seen them since. Also, since bulb foliage dies you'll want to plant something like groundcovers or daylilies that covers the dead foliage. And because you can't see the bulbs after you plant them, you'll have to remember (or mark) where you put them.

There are so many choices that there are companies that actually specialize just in bulbs (McClure and Zimmerman). And bulbs are not only for spring – there are summer and fall choices as well. So if you don't get your bulbs in now, wait until spring and plant some summer gladioli. But we're going to focus on spring bulbs and that means crocus, tulips, daffodils, chionodoxa, hyacinth, muscari, iris (the bulb type not the rhizomes), scilla, alliums, and frittalaria. Locally High Country Gardens has an excellent selection for us – check out their new store, their catalog or website.

The following are my favorite choices which I have planted either in my meadows (the grass hides them after they bloom), my rock gardens where the stone cress hides the dead foliage, or in groundcover like creeping germander. For crocus I like Snow Bunting (white) and Pickwick (lavender striped). The species tulips, Greigii, Kaufmanniana, Darwin hybrids, Clusiana, and Batalinii are good choices and there are too many for me to list what I have. Originally, the rabbits ate my green tulip foliage and the tulips never bloomed so I surrounded them with daffodils which are poisonous to rabbits. And speaking of daffodils I

have two little ones: Baby Moon and Tete-a-tete. I also have a double and some single blooms, but can't recall which varieties. The daffodils and tulips bloom across the season, some early, some mid, and some late. But the first bulbs up are not the crocus or daffodils; they are the iris reticulata, a baby iris with deep purple petals and gold centers. They are planted in the groundcover right by the front door and I can see them from my kitchen window. Starflower, a light blue color, is also an early bloomer. Finally, I have drumstick alliums (ornamental onions), one purple sensation allium, and little blue chionodoxa. I want to get some clusiana tulips and some Spanish bells this year to round out my collection.

Planting bulbs is pretty easy. Wait until after the first frost. Bulbs need to be planted with the pointy end up at a depth that's 3x the widest part. If you can't figure out which way is up turn the bulb on its side. Include some superphosphate in the bottom of the hole, cover with a little soil, place the bulb, and cover with remaining soil. An easier way to plant is to dig a patch of soil (not just one hole at a time) to the proper depth, add the superphosphate, cover with soil, then throw the bulbs up into the air, make sure they point up, and cover with soil.

Care is pretty easy too. Water them occasionally over the winter. Just before blooming sprinkle blood meal around them. After the bulbs bloom **DO NOT REMOVE THE FOLIAGE UNTIL IT'S COMPLETELY BROWN**. When they quit blooming profusely they need to be divided. Dig up some and spread them elsewhere or give them to friends.

The first thing you know we'll be surrounded by the signs of early spring with colorful crocus, tulips, daffodils, and alliums.