



Planting Spring-Flowering Bulbs

by The Garden Hoe, Lis Friemoth

When you think of fall, think of bulbs. This is a great time to look at all of those wonderful catalogs and pick out the style and color your garden will be wearing next spring. After you have placed your order, give your garden that tailored “couture” look by preparing a proper bed to showcase those bulbs. That proper bed may be prepared using different techniques – but all will result in happy bulbs.

The first step is to determine what type site you have. Most spring-flowering bulbs prefer to have well-drained soil and plenty of sunshine - there are some that do thrive on moist conditions but the majority will not. If you have wet spots or areas that just do not drain well during a normal summer season, it would be best not to plant directly in the ground. Adequately sized (high and deep) raised beds will provide the necessary drainage for optimum growth and over-wintering success. Within the site you have chosen for your sumptuous bulb display – does the soil have good composition? If not, adding some good quality, composted organic material may help. As always, getting a quality soil test will put you firmly on the right track. Check out the sun conditions. How many hours per day does it get? And keep in mind that deciduous trees may not be leafed out at the time of spring bulb growth. Make sure that there is adequate light for your chosen bulbs.

So, you have an idea of your site conditions - now let's talk bed preparation. If these bulbs will be going into a garden bed that has been maintained – tilled or turned over every so often, weeded and watered – loosening up the soil to a depth of about 12” will probably be all that is needed to get the bulbs into the ground. If you are looking at a site that has not been previously worked there a couple of different ways to approach preparation.

Planting bulbs in a lawn or grassy area can give the appearance of naturally occurring flowers. But how can you do that without creating a tilled garden bed? Well, very easily. Choose the location for the bulb display, remember to plant in groups or drifts (meandering planting) to really maximize the impact in lawns. Using a sharp soil knife or other implement cut a U-shape in the lawn area you want to plant and peel back the flap, exposing the soil beneath. Using a hoe (my favorite garden tool), small spade, or trowel, work up the soil until it is loose. Place the bulbs on the surface approximately where you would like them to be and then gently bury them to a depth of about 3 – 4 times the diameter of the bulb. When placing the bulbs in the soil, make sure that the pointy side is up as that is where the stems will emerge. Cover with soil, replace the flap of turf, and water the area very well.

If creating a completely new garden bed area, you will need to get rid of the existing ground cover – if it is grass, it will need to be removed. If it is weeds, they will have to be eliminated. Choices range from chemical treatment to physically removing the existing cover. Whatever you choose, it will all have to be

gone in order to successfully create a planting bed. Once the offending material is removed till the soil, adding some well composted organic material to the planting area. Working the composted material into the existing soil will accomplish two tasks – ensure better drainage and add more life to the soil. Prior to planting, look at various designs - studied geometric design, arranged strictly by color or height, or joyful, random abandon. Your choice, you are at the controls. Arrange the bulbs on the surface prior to planting to give you an idea of placement. When you are ready to bury the bulbs, planting depth of 3-4 times the diameter of the bulb is recommended. If you have various sized bulbs placed closely together within your planting design, they can be planted within the same hole at varying depths. Once planted, be sure to water in very well.

Containers are a fantastic way to showcase bulbs. If planning a design for a container, planter or raised bed, the depth of that container plays a large part in the soil content and planting depth. Raised beds with ground contact generally do better with a soil mix that is similar in texture and content to the native soil. Entirely contained planters do best with a full-bodied, well drained, sterile potting mix. If planters are deep enough to accommodate, plant using the 3- 4 times rule. When planting in an area that has limited soil depth, bulbs are planted relatively shallow, just beneath the soil level, to provide the roots with the room necessary to develop as deep as possible. This means that as the bulbs emerge and grow next season, you may have to provide above ground stem support – a small task for such a grand payoff. Containers and planters, if not well insulated may freeze and thaw enough to kill the bulbs – be aware of location and provide extra cover if needed, to get them through our long winter months. If the containers are moveable, be sure to keep them away from exhaust fumes (garage) as that can cause bloom abortion.

Fertilizer is important to the growth of bulbs as they are heavy feeders at various stages of their growing cycle. A fall slow release fertilization – same time as the lawn – will give them a needed boost for the upcoming spring. They need another fertilizer boost as they are actively growing but prior to flowering. Using a fertilizer especially for bulbs is best. You may have noticed that I did not recommend using bone meal as a planting accompaniment. Once highly recommended, today's bone meal formulations are not considered enough of a benefit to warrant special addition.

A couple of interesting tidbits on bulb health - bulbs do best when planted at soil temperatures of 60 degrees or less. Earlier planting may sacrifice bloom, long term health and productivity. Be patient. Often we try to stretch a few bulbs into many separate areas, thinking that this will give us more to look at. All it does is make each display appear wimpy. There is nothing wrong with only planting five bulbs – but plant all five together and enjoy the show.