



Winter equinox is not that far away – we are already into November people! But don't worry it's not too late to plant those bulbs that have been patiently waiting for your attention or purchase, if you look hard. *Tulipa* and *Narcissus*, the major bulbs, are just a couple in the vast array of bulbs, corms, and tubers available to brighten the spring landscape show. Consider planting *Allium*, *Anemone*, *Camassia*, *Chionodoxa*, *Crocus*, *Hyacinthoides*, *Hyacinthus*, *Muscari*, and *Scilla* also. Most of these bulbs (yes – I'm lumping them all together under the name bulbs – so don't call to correct me) are botanical annuals – meaning that they do well and truly complete their life cycle in one year. Does that mean that they will not return for more than that one year? No, if growing conditions are good, planting was done well, and food was provided to make them happy, they will reproduce and the offspring will bloom for your enjoyment in subsequent years.

If you want the bulbs to do well, especially at this point in the fall - don't even think of skimping on planting preparation. Choose a spot that receives full to partial sun during the early part of the season. If you only have partial sun sights available, be picky in where you put the bulbs. As long as some sun is available until the bulb foliage has browned, the bulbs will be able to produce enough carbohydrates for maintenance, health, and food storage – all important for bloom development. Within those sites, the best options for many of the bulbs are areas that are well-drained and relatively dry throughout the summer months. Nicely loosened, well-drained soil will give the bulbs the best opportunity to thrive, be healthy, and provide a good spring show. Sites along buildings, near woodland edges, and in rock gardens work very well. Do be sure to check growing conditions for each species purchased as requirements may vary. The optimal time for planting bulbs is when soil temperatures have declined to around 60 degrees Fahrenheit with readily available fall moisture for good, strong root development.

Fertility is important to all bulbs. The tendency is to put them in and forget about them. If this sounds like a familiar scenario, be sure to fertilize as the bulbs go into the ground. Look for a product that is a balanced formulation specifically made for planting time application

and apply according to the label directions. Give them a fighting chance with a healthy start. Many products will do best when worked into the bed and allowed to interact with the natural soil chemistry. If the planting areas are too wide spread to do a general application, be sure to add the recommended amount to the soil in the prepared hole. Again – read and follow the label to prevent bulb burn as some fertilizers have the potential to damage bulbs if placed directly on them. Doing a bit homework will help you to avoid unpleasant surprises. If you need to look at critter deterrents, now would be the time to choose a product and apply according to directions. Give this some serious consideration as there is nothing worse than planting hundreds of bulbs in anticipation of a beautiful spring display, and having critters eat them all before emergence. There are some great, effective products out there that can be used to treat whatever is needed - the bulbs, the soil, or surrounding areas.

Now to the fun stuff – the bulbs. Planning for display is a crucial part of choosing what to buy. A few main considerations include color, structure and height, bloom form and time, and of course, hardiness. Don't bother to buy bulbs that will not survive the cold – unless you will be using them for indoor forcing. Disappointment is not fun.

The entire *Allium* genus (onion family) has fun, vertical impact and grow so easily in our area that there is no reason not to put some in. They are readily available in forms that are tall and stately, short and graceful, and delightfully odd colored. One to look for is a hybrid of *A. christophii* and *A. maclearii* - 'Globemaster' which has a strong structure, consistently developing 10" diameter purple heads on 3' stems. *A. caeruleum* (or *A. azureum*) has clear blue coloring on 1" heads standing on 2' stems – this one prefers hot, dry conditions – so be careful in placement. *A. sphaerocephalum* (Drumstick Allium or Chives) has upright 2' – 3' stems with ball-like heads that gracefully dance with the wind – makes a nice cut flower.

*Camassia* are underused and often ignored native North American bulbs that do very well in low meadows, woodland settings – realistically - in any area with moist, damp soils in the spring, they love full sun and drier summer soils. Commonly called Indian hyacinth or

Quamash, *Camassia* "Blue Melody" can reach to about 3' and has deep bluish purple flower spikes overlooking white-edged green grass-like foliage. *C. quamash* (or *C. esculenta*) is a shorter species of baby blue flower coloring and green foliage while *C. leichtlinii* has 3' blue flower spikes accented with yellow anthers over rather upright green leaves. The bulbs (tubers really) on these are huge so don't be surprised. They do very well planted in mass quantities but they are slow spreaders. Flower display is best around June.

*Chionodoxa* (or Glory of the Snow) are great smaller stature bulbs that bloom anytime in March or April. *C. forbesii* provide white centered, blue flowers on 8" stems. Even though all are quite pretty, *C. luciliae* species is considered to be the best selection within this genus. The blue flowers with white centers should last for about a month if weather stays cool during the blooming period. *C. luciliae* "Alba" is a showy plant with clusters of very white flowers reaching about 6" in height. *C. luciliae* "Pink Giant" has gorgeous translucent pink blooms on taller (8" – 10") stems. *Eranthis cilicica* or winter aconite is another lovely smaller stature bulb (technically a tuber) only growing to a few inches in height, but it produces a clear yellow flower emerging on bronze-tinged foliage out of the nearly frozen ground in late winter or early spring. Both of these early season bulbs are great for under-planting color with hyacinths and daffodils. They also do very well in rock gardens but are small enough to get lost in grassy areas.

*Fritillaria* can be a frustrating bulb to grow. Not that they are that difficult to find, plant, or grow. But, as excitable and adventurous gardeners, we can be carried away by the form and coloring and not pay close enough attention to the zonal requirements or the bulb condition. The flower arrangement has two styles within this genus - either bell-like flowers that follow the stem upwards for a vertically striking early season display or one large, clustered flower head with a bit of top foliage above each stem. These bulbs need to be kept somewhat moist prior to planting as they will not flower reliably if allowed to dry out during shipment or while awaiting purchase at store locations. Check yours for moisture if you have some sitting around waiting to be planted. Most will take full sun but do like a bit of partial shade. There are only a handful of species within this genus that are truly hardy for our area, specifically *F. meleagris* (checkered mauve to purple single stemmed flowers, about 1 ¼' tall) and *F. pallidiflora*

(light yellow colored flowers on 2' stems). If you want to try some that are not reliably hardy for our area, such as *F. imperialis* (Crown Imperials, available in multiple colors, very impressive) or *F. persica* (Persian Fritillary – the dusky purple coloring makes a good addition for those dark toned flower beds), pick a protected area, and expect to put some extra effort into winter cover and care.

And I really can't do this article without mentioning something about *Tulipa* or tulips. They are a joy to look at every spring and when chosen wisely, will increase nicely over a few short years. They are categorized into fourteen different divisions, which, for most gardeners, is not a crucial thing to know. But, it does help to understand the differences if you are looking for a particular bloom form and foliage colorization, or are ordering from a non-illustrated list. We'll go over some of the great selections in just a few of the divisions. Single and double petal forms include early, mid-, and late season divisions, the Darwin hybrid division, and the Triumph division. Excellent performers include the fragrant "Apricot Beauty," "Harry's Memory," "Key West," "Negrita," "Peach Blossom," "Picasso," "Purple Prince," and "Salmon Pearl."

Lily-flowering (the petals splay outward at the top) have many great cultivars to choose from including "Ballerina," "Burgundy," "China Pink," "Queen of Sheba," "White Elegance," and "William and Mary." Parrot-type (usually bright colors with serrated or twisted petals) offer texture to any garden or container display. "Apricot Parrot," "Black Parrot," "Estella Rijnveld," "Green Wave," "Rococo," and "Snow Parrot" are just a handful. Variegated colors – everything mixed from reds, whites, pinks, purples to green tinged – include many good selections.

Try some in the Kaufmanniana division (shorter, very hardy, star shaped blooms), and the Greigii division (variegated foliage – almost hosta looking leaves). "Corsage," "Donna Bella," "Johann Strauss," "Oratorio," "Pinocchio," "Red Riding Hood," "Rembrandt," and "Quebec" are all worth planting. Double late blooming (or peony flowering) and bouquet style (with multiple blooms per stem) also offer lots of great choices - "Annelinde," "Angelique," "Black Hero," "Blue Spectacle," "Charming Lady," "Mount Tacoma," and "Orange Princess."

Plant them already!