



Now we're getting to the real fall season – equinox has come and gone. To me that signals the time to plant those favorite, and maybe some new, spring bloomers. Those easily recognizable flowers are the ones that get the most attention and planting efforts – *Tulipa* and *Narcissus*, which are often referred to as major bulbs. Looking beyond them, there are so many fantastic minor bulbs (or corms, or tubers – we will allow them to be referred to loosely as bulbs for the sake of ease) – *Allium*, *Anemone*, *Camassia*, *Chionodoxa*, *Crocus*, *Hyacinthoides*, *Hyacinthus*, *Muscari*, and *Scilla* to name a handful - that offer a glorious show by themselves, and alongside those old favorites. Let's talk about the conditions for planting, food to make them happy, and a few of those awesome bulb selections for sensory joy in the spring.

Proper preparation is always important, so don't even think of skimping on this phase when planting bulbs. Be sure to choose a spot with good light (sun to partial shade) during the early part of the season. As long as shade is partial until the bulb foliage has browned, the bulbs will be able to produce enough carbohydrates to maintain good health and successfully store food for bloom development. Ideally, most bulbs prefer to be dry during the summer months so look to areas that are not heavily irrigated – edges of buildings, woodland settings, and in rocky areas. (Keep in mind that there are always exceptions to every rule – so learn the specific growing conditions of bulb choices.) Rock gardens are often overlooked, and yet, good candidates for bulb displays. If the beds contemplated for planting are well drained – that's fantastic. If not, please consider amendments or landscaping changes (installing drainage tile or raised beds) that will encourage and result in better drainage. Nicely loosened, well-drained soil will give the bulbs the best opportunity to thrive, be healthy, and provide a good spring show. 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. Hmm...sounds like our current conditions, doesn't it?

To fertilize or not is always a good question. With bulbs, the tendency is to put them in and forget about them. If this sounds like your form of gardening – it is especially important to fertilize them as they are planted. A well balanced product made specifically for bulbs will provide the necessary nutrients to give a healthy start. Bone meal, alone, is not as nutritionally complete as needed for long term health and growth. Many products will do best when worked into the soil either in the whole bed or if planting in a clump, into the soil of the prepared hole. Some fertilizer

products may have the potential to burn the bulbs if placed directly next to them and not worked into the soil prior to placing the bulbs into the planting area. Always read and closely follow the label as to application technique and timing to avoid unpleasant after-effects. 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 for a beautiful display, only to then realize, in June when nothing emerges, that something ate them all. And 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 – so many bulbs to choose from, so little time. 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 even buy bulbs that will not survive the cold – that will only lead to disappointment and wasted purchases. Choosing wisely will allow you to enjoy displays for many years rather than none.

The entire *Allium* genus has fun, vertical impact and grow so easily in our area that there is no reason not to put some in. They belong to the onion family and do carry a faint onion scent, but not to the point of distraction. Whether you are looking for tall and grand, short and graceful, or oddly colored – all can easily be found locally, through mail order, or on-line. One to look for is a hybrid of *A. christophii* and *A. macleanii* - 'Globemaster' which is one of the best, with strong structure and continually developing 10" purple heads on 3' stems. *A. caeruleum* (or *A. azureum*) has wonderful blue coloring on smaller 1 1/2" heads standing on 2' stems but definitely prefers hot, dry conditions – so be careful in placement and *A. sphaerocephalum* (Drumstick Allium or Chives) which has wonderful 2' – 3' stems with ball-like heads that dance with the wind – makes a great cut flower, too.

*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. These beauties are commonly called Indian hyacinth or Quamash. *Camassia* 'Blue Melody' can reach to about 3' and has wonderful deep bluish purple flower spikes over white-edged green grass-like foliage. *C. quamash* (or *C. esculenta*) is a shorter species with baby blue coloring and green foliage while *C. leichtlinii* has 3' blue flower spikes accented with yellow anthers over rather

upright green leaves. Any and all are well worth planting in mass quantities for a calming May/June display. These are slow spreaders so be patient with Mama Nature on this one.

*Chionodoxa* (or Glory of the Snow) are great smaller stature bulbs that bloom anytime in March or April. *C. forbesii* provide beautiful blue flowers with white centers on 8" stems emerging somewhere around March. *C. luciliae* species is considered to be the best 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, a very pretty show with this one. *Eranthis cilicica* or winter aconite is another lovely smaller stature bulb – well, it's really a tuber - only growing to a few inches in height, producing a delightfully clear yellow flower that emerges on bronze-tinged foliage out of the nearly frozen ground in late winter or early spring. Both of these early season beauties provide great under-planting color for early hyacinths and daffodils and will do quite well in rock gardens but really fail to impress when planted in grassy areas. Large mass plantings of 50 – 100 are best for a really great display.

*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. And they are impressive enough when in bloom to throw us for a loop. 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. Be cautious and ask questions when buying them as they are not inexpensive - use your good judgment. 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* (nicely checkered mauve to purple single stemmed flowers, about 1 ¼' tall) and *F. pallidiflora* (lovely, 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 somewhat protected area, and expect to put some extra effort into winter cover and care. The best display venue for these bulbs is in mass plantings, with a dozen or more planted in each conditionally optimal

site. One of the most reliable for our northern climate is the smaller flowering *F. meleagris* often called guinea hen flowers as the checkered pattern on the petals are somewhat reminiscent of - you guessed it - guinea hens.

And I really can't do this article without mentioning something about *Tulipa*. Humans have a long, and often not pretty, history with these flowers - wars were fought over them, people were killed and enslaved because of them - yet we love them still. *Tulipa* or tulips 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 learn or memorize. 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 'Apricot Beauty' (fragrant), 'Barcelona', 'Beau Monde', 'Francoise', 'Harry's Memory', 'Key West', 'Negrita', 'Orange Queen', 'Peach Blossom', 'Picasso', 'Purple Prince', 'Royal Virgin', 'Salmon Pearl', and 'Yokohama'. Lily-flowering (the petals splay outward at the top) have many great cultivars to choose from including 'Ballerina', 'Burgundy', 'China Pink', 'Lilychic', 'Queen of Sheba', 'White Elegance', and 'William and Mary'. Parrot-type (usually bright colors with serrated or twisted petals) has become very popular and offer interesting texture to any garden or container display. 'Apricot Parrot', 'Blue Parrot', 'Black Parrot', 'Estella Rijnveld', 'Fantasy', 'Green Wave', 'Rococo', and 'Snow Parrot' are just a handful. Variegated colors – everything mixed from reds, whites, pinks, purples to green tinged – include so many good ones that it's difficult to limit the selections. You may want to 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) are gorgeous and also offer lots of great choices - 'Annelinde', 'Angelique', 'Black Hero', 'Blue Spectacle', 'Charming Lady', 'Christo', 'Mount Tacoma', 'Orange Princess', and 'True and Fair'.

Go forth, shop, and plant!