

Home Grounds Fact Sheet

Spring Flowering Bulbs

In all phases of gardening, nothing is more rewarding than the appearance of spring-flowering bulbs, because they mark the end of winter and the beginning of a new season. Even before the last snow has melted, bulb flowers can be seen poking their heads into the new dawn of spring and adding life and color to the dormant garden.

Spring-flowering bulbs should be planted in the fall as long as the ground can be worked. Most bulbs should be planted two and a half times deeper than their diameter. A bulb one inch in diameter should be planted with its bottom two and a half inches deep; a three inch diameter bulb should be planted seven inches deep. Ideally, spring flowering bulbs should be planted in mass plantings, followed in early summer by annuals. Bulbs can also be planted along walks and paths. The blooming season begins in late February or early March with snow drops and winter aconites, followed by crocuses, scillas, hyacinths, daffodils and tulips.

Purchasing Bulbs

When purchasing bulbs at a garden center, look for large, firm ones free of mold and not showing signs of sprouts. Bulbs that are soft to the touch may be starting disease or rot. Many mail-order firms offer a wide selection of bulbs. Check catalogs for specific varieties.

Soil

The soil must be well prepared if bulbs are to remain in vigorous condition for several years. Fertilizer should be added before bulbs are planted. The best fertilizer is a complete one, such as 5-10-5 or 5-10-10, applied at the rate of 1 pound to 100 square feet of planting area. Work it into the top 4-6 inches of soil. When bulbs are in bloom, increase fertilizer applications to two pounds per 100 square feet. Avoid fertilizer contact with bulb foliage. Fertilizer should be scratched into the upper inch of soil. Organic matter such as compost, peat moss and manure can be added to heavy soils to improve texture. It should be applied at the rate of 3 bushels per 100 square feet and worked into the top 8 inches of soil. Manure should be well rotted - fresh manure may injure bulbs. Do not exceed 2 bushels for each 100 square feet.

Planting

Bulbs should be planted where there is good drainage and sunlight. Very few spring-flowering bulbs can withstand wet, poorly-drained soil. Use a trowel or bulb planter for each hole. Be sure to loosen the soil under each bulb so the roots can easily penetrate it. Larger bulbs such as tulips and daffodils should be planted about 8 inches apart. The bulbs will have enough room for 2 or 3 years' growth before they must be dug up and divided. Crocus and grape hyacinths can be planted about 4 inches apart. Some of the smaller bulbs, such as winter aconites and scillas, should be placed 2 to 3 inches apart. For naturalized planting, place narcissi at least 10 inches apart and set the small bulbs 20 to a square foot.

Growth

Removal of seed pods is important if bulbs are to be left in the ground for a number of years. If pods are not removed, the new bulbs will be much smaller. The opposite effect occurs when leaves are removed from the bulbs. Leaves should remain on the bulbs until they turn yellow—in the summer through the fall. Foliage should then be cut off at ground level. Remove the foliage from the garden and discard it.

Digging

After several years in the ground, daffodils and tulips form a clump of multiple bulbs, resulting in a gradual decline in stem length and flower size. If bulbs have declined sharply, it may be better to discard and start with new ones.



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