

## **Fall Bulbs for Spring Bloom**

Can you believe that it's time to start thinking about spring? Some of the earliest flowers come from spring-blooming bulbs that are planted in the fall . . . like, right now!

### **Buying bulbs**

Size matters! Buy the largest ones you feel you can afford. Bulbs are measured around the circumference in centimeters. Tulips should be 12 centimeters or more; daffodils should be 16 centimeters or more; amaryllis can range up to 32-34 centimeters around. Smaller bulbs are more plentiful and cheaper but, of course, a smaller bulb produces smaller results. Larger bulb sizes can be found at many on-line sites and reputable nurseries. The six very common and easiest-to-grow bulbs are daffodils, crocus, snowdrops, hyacinths, tulips and alliums.

**Tulips** in our area are annuals, not perennials, and will need about 8-10 weeks of pre-chilling in a refrigerator crisper to get an adequate display. Our ground temperatures in this part of Oklahoma are not cold enough for them. A few may return the second year but blooms will be scanty. Just decide before buying tulip bulbs that you are willing to spend the money for a one-year show. If you are willing to do that, buy the bulbs as early as you can so that you can refrigerator chill them in the months of October and November, then plant them in December.

**Daffodils** are dependable re-blooming perennials with no fussy requirements and can last for years. Whatever bulbs you wish to purchase, don't be stingy with your plant material. Try to buy enough to plant liberally. It takes about 100 tulip bulbs to make a noticeable showing. Don't plant bulbs in rows but, rather, plant randomly for that naturalistic look.

### **Choosing a site**

There are two key considerations when choosing a site for bulbs:

1. **Sunlight:** Most bulbs need ample sunshine to bloom well next spring and to store up the energy required to flower in future springs. Some bulbs, including

crocuses and scillas, can be planted beneath deciduous trees as they are able to satisfy their light needs before the trees leaf out.

2. **Drainage:** All bulbs need good drainage. Never plant bulbs where water collects as they will essentially rot in the ground. The drainage of heavy clay soils can be improved by working in organic matter such as compost.

Also, consider whether your site is located in a windy or a more protected area. If an exposed windy site is chosen, it might be best to choose bulbs that are shorter rather than the tallest ones of the species which can get windblown and quickly lose petals.

### **Two Ways to Plant**

1. **Plant a bed:** Excavate the area to the required depth, placing the loose soil on a tarp, plywood, or cardboard. Loosen the soil in the bottom of the bed. Set the bulbs in the bed. Replace the soil gently to avoid knocking the bulbs out of position. If the soil is dry, water thoroughly.

2. **Planting individually:** Dig a hole with a trowel or bulb planter. Drop the bulb (or bulbs, as 3-4 small ones can be planted in a single hole) down into the hole and replace the soil. Water well.

While it is helpful to plant bulbs right side up, don't worry too much about which end is up on a bulb. Based on gravity, bulbs know to send shoots up and roots down. They will likely grow and bloom even if you plant them upside down. This is called *geotropism*.

Read the instructions that come with your bulbs but, generally, bulbs should be planted to a depth of 3 times their height. Ideally, the soil temperature should be around 55 degrees. Check the [okmesonet.com](http://okmesonet.com) site if you are unsure of what the soil temperature is.

If you use mulch, you can reduce the planting depth for the bulbs. The denser the mulch, the greater the reduction, but, as a rule of thumb, 2" of mulch equals 1" of soil. Another benefit to using 2-3" of mulch is that it moderates soil temperatures and controls moisture and weeds.

## **Watering**

Bulbs need ample moisture from fall when they are making roots until they finish flowering in spring. Water during winter if rainfall is scarce. Stop watering after blooming. Supplemental watering after bloom may cause bulbs to rot.

## **Fertilizing**

The bulbs you purchase already have next year's flowers set inside them so there is no need to fertilize at planting time. If you intend for your bulbs to be long-term residents of your landscape, you may want to fertilize lightly when the shoots start appearing in the spring.

## **Care after blooming**

For bulbs that you intend to leave in the landscape, the leaves should be left on the plant after the blossom fades. Cut the bloom stem off 3-4 inches so that the plant does not put any energy into developing seeds. It will be to your advantage for that energy to go into building reserves for next year's flower. Let the leaves ripen (that is, let them turn yellow over time). Don't bundle up the leaves but let them sprawl out to collect the sunshine. Sometimes it takes until June for daffodil foliage to completely wither, at which time they can be removed. Just remember that this year's leaves equal next year's flowers. For tulips, it may be best to just pull them out after bloom and replant the next fall.