

Plenty of Time to Plant Spring-Blooming Bulbs

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Fall is the best time to plant spring-blooming bulbs. Proper soil preparation and planting techniques can make the difference between success and failure in a bulb garden. Since most spring-blooming bulbs can be planted any time between now and mid-November, we have time to do things properly.

The best bulbs come from reputable businesses, either local or catalog sources. Order bulbs early from catalogs, and make your selections at local sources as soon as the bulbs are offered for sale. Select large, firm, plump bulbs or roots. Do not purchase any that are bruised, blemished, or soft.

Nothing will cause bulbs to deteriorate faster than poorly drained soil. A bed for bulbs should be tilled or dug deeply, with generous amounts of organic matter mixed in. However, if you are planting bulbs between existing shrubs or perennials, this deep digging may disturb their roots and cause injury. In this situation, do not add organic matter to individual planting holes, or you'll risk drowning the bulbs.

Most flowering bulbs require slightly acid soils, with high phosphate levels and only moderate amounts of nitrogen. Before adjusting any of these factors, I suggest getting your soil tested by a reputable lab, otherwise you won't know what to add, or how much.

Bulbs need to be planted deeply enough that they are insulated from surface air temperatures. While most people fear that winter cold will kill their bulbs, it's actually the opposite we need to worry about: summer heat. Hot, dry soil is the main reason so many of us in southern Indiana have problems with tulips.

Bulbs should be planted to a depth equal to 2.5 to 3 times their widest diameter. So, for example, if I have a bulb that's 1 inch wide, I should dig a hole deeply enough so that the top of the bulb is about 3 inches below the soil surface. All bulbs should be planted with the base down (pointy side up).

There are some exceptions to this rule, mostly with the "bulbs" that aren't really bulbs. For example, iris rhizomes and begonia tubers should be placed at ground level, and barely covered with soil.

Proper spacing of the bulbs is based on their size. Small bulbs can be placed closer together, but large bulbs should be planted further apart. Planting too far apart doesn't

provide a good visual effect. However, planting too close together will crowd the bulbs, and you will need to dig them up and divide them sooner. Masses of similar plants and colors look better than individual plants. Plant the bulbs in groups of five or seven; odd numbers of plants look more natural. Avoid planting in straight rows, for the same reason.

Once everything is planted, water it in with about one inch of water. Hold off mulching until the ground freezes, then spread about 3 to 4 inches of wood chips or shredded bark over the planting. This will keep the bulbs cold, and prevent them from sprouting too early.

Purdue has an excellent publication on planting and caring for bulbs. To get a copy, go online to the Purdue Extension Store (<https://mdc.itap.purdue.edu>) and type HO-86 in the search bar. You can also email me, or call my office at (812) 435-5287.