

Year Round Gardening

Be an Optimist, Plant Bulbs Now for Spring Color

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Gardeners are optimists; we know planting hardy bulbs now will bring us flowers in spring. Hardy bulbs include tulips, daffodils, crocus, squills, hyacinths, fritillaria and alliums just to name a few.

Bulbs should be in the ground 4-6 weeks before the ground freezes, the second half of September through mid-October is the time frame to plant bulbs in Colorado Springs. Bulbs can be purchased at garden centers and many other stores. Size matters, bigger bulbs cost more but they produce bigger flowers. Do not purchase bulbs with blemishes or soft spots.

Bulbs are best planted in drifts or clumps. Be sure to include some small very early species like crocus or squill, these wonderful harbingers of spring will pop up late in winter, often surrounded by melting snow. Later in the season tulips and daffodils will brighten your garden as your perennials just begin to emerge (long before you can plant annuals). When planting bulbs remember that the foliage will persist for several weeks after the bloom fades. Try to place drifts among perennials that will disguise the fading foliage



later in the spring. In other words, plant your bulbs behind, not in front of perennial plants and shrubs. Use long colorful golf tees to mark your bulb locations, this is an inexpensive way to avoid inadvertently digging those bulbs up.

Most of the bulbs listed above will act like perennials in the garden, lasting many years with good care. It may be necessary to lift them every 3 to 5 years and divide the bulbs to maintain vigor. Tulips are an exception, many are planted as annuals. Tulips lose vigor, gradually being reduced to a single leaf with no bloom after a few years. There are some tulips which with proper care can be maintained over several years. Choose Darwin hybrids or species tulips if you want longer-lasting tulips.

Most bulbs should be planted in a sunny well drained site. There are a few species which adapt well to shadier woodland planting; Snake's Head Fritillary (*Fritillaria meleagris*) is a novel example. Water if needed until the ground freezes. Be careful not to overwater. Once cold weather sets in you may mulch the planting area to mitigate potentially damaging freeze-thaw cycles.

Bulbs should be planted at a depth which is 4 times the height of the bulb. Apply a high phosphorous fertilizer (for example 0-46-0) when planting. Plant the bulbs tip side up.

Critters can be a problem both for the bulbs and plants. General rules of thumb are:

- nothing bothers daffodil bulbs or plants
- deer love to eat tulips, they generally leave fritillaria and alliums alone
- deer generally don't bother crocus, but rabbits may
- If you have a lot of squirrel or vole activity consider using some chicken wire to create a "bulb cage" when planting to discourage theft

Plant some bulbs now you will be glad you did later.

When you have questions, Colorado State University Extension has research-based answers. Get answers to your horticulture questions by visiting ask.extension.org or by calling a Colorado Master Gardener Volunteer at 520-7684, 9:00 to 12:00 Mondays and Wednesdays.