

Planting & Caring for Spring Bulbs



PREPARATION & PLANTING

Fall is the prime time for planting hardy spring flowering bulbs. Most bulbs can be planted until the ground freezes. Good soil drainage is essential! If your soil isn't loamy and easily worked, mix compost, peat moss or other organic material into the top 12" to 18". Work up the entire bed rather than just individual planting holes. Add a high-phosphorus plant food (rock phosphate, superphosphate, etc.), into bottoms of holes at planting. Be sure to cover fertilizer with soil when planting so that the bulb does not directly contact the fertilizer. Use bone meal only if you're sure animals will not dig it up. Press bulbs into holes root down, point up and cover with soil.

The general rule of thumb is to plant spring bulbs two to three times as deep as the bulb is tall – around 8" deep for tulips and daffodils. Smaller bulbs, 3" – 4" inches deep. For summer bulbs, see instructions that come with them.

Consider light requirements for each plant. Since early spring bulbs bloom before most trees or shrubs leaf out, they can successfully be planted under trees and shrubs. Many summer blooming bulbs require full sun or partial shade. Bloom time can be affected by location.

WATERING

Rain usually provides sufficient water for spring-flowering bulbs, but they benefit from watering during prolonged dry spells, even after flowering. Water bulbs after planting. This will help settle the soil in the planting bed plus provide needed moisture for the bulbs to start rooting. Fall planted bulbs must root before cold weather. Avoid over-watering at planting time since this can result in bulb rot.

If the soil is dry, start watering spring and summer bulbs when flower buds first appear. Water deeply, as it needs to soak to the depth bulbs were planted. Through the bud, bloom and early foliage stage, add about 1" of water per week if not already supplied by rainfall. Using a soaker hose will keep water off blooms.

FERTILIZING

Both spring and summer bulbs need phosphorous to encourage root development. Phosphorous moves very little once applied to the soil, so it needs to be mixed into the soil below where bulbs are located so it can be utilized by the roots. Mix bone meal or superphosphate into lower part of bed at planting.

If bulbs are going to remain in the same location for more than a year, supply additional fertilizer. Fertilize bulbs in spring after they have finished blooming and before the leaves die back. Mix into the soil 5 tablespoons of 10-10-10 soluble fertilizer (or equivalent bulb fertilizer) plus two cups bone meal per 10 sq. ft.

Summer and fall flowering bulbs should be fertilized monthly as soon as shoots emerge and until plants flower. Do not fertilize during flowering, as it can encourage bulb rot and shorten the life of the flowers. Split 7 tablespoons 10-10-10 soluble fertilizer (or bulb fertilizer) over 2 or 3 applications per 10 sq. ft.



Optimum pH for bulbs is 6 to 7. Get a soil test to determine if lime needs to be applied to adjust pH. If needed, limestone should be worked into the soil.

MULCHING

Cover spring-flowering bulb plantings with 2 – 4” of organic material after cold weather arrives. Avoid unshredded leaves, as they can mat down tightly. Mulch helps minimize temperature fluctuation and maintain moisture levels. Remove mulch in early spring. The small, early blooming bulbs should not be mulched.

STAKING

Some tall, heavy-flowered plants may require staking or support rings. Be careful not to damage the bulbs when inserting stakes.

DEADHEADING

After flowers fade, remove them so plants don't invest energy in developing seeds. **Do not remove foliage** until it turns yellow and dies back naturally. Then, cut at ground level and remove it to prevent disease. Whatever else you do or don't do, resist the temptation to remove bulb foliage while it is green. The green leaves nourish the bulb and next year's flower buds, which form during summer.

Do not braid leaves to get them out of the way. Braiding reduces the amount of sunlight the leaves get and hinders growth. It is safe to mow the green leaves of crocuses and snowdrops in your lawn if you wait at least six weeks after blooming. Take as few leaves as possible if cutting blooms to bring inside. Allow smaller bulbs to set seed, so they self-sow and form ever-larger drifts.

There are several ways to divert attention from withering plants. Add annuals to the bulb garden to help hide yellowing foliage. Place bulbs behind the plants on the front edge of a border planting. Plant taller flowering bulbs behind lower growing foreground shrubs. Plant bulbs with groundcovers and perennials like hosta or daylilies.

DIGGING & STORING SPRING BULBS

Once foliage dies back or matures (late spring/early summer), the bulb is dormant. After spring bulbs enter dormancy, you can dig them up, if needed. Store dug up bulbs in a well-ventilated place and replant in the fall. Dig tender summer bulbs after foliage dies or is killed by frost. Clean off excess soil and store in a cool (60-65° F), dry place over winter. Avoid storing bulbs at temperatures below 50° or above 70° F.

Every 5 years daffodils and crocus should be dug, divided and replanted to prevent overcrowding. Overcrowding will cause decreased flower size and uneven bloom and plant height. Dig bulbs, spread them out and replant.

INDOOR PLANTING & GROWING TIPS

To plant bulbs indoors, choose a container with good drainage, even covering bottom with a thin layer of gravel. Add a layer of moist potting soil and set bulbs on it. They should be close together, but not touching each other or container sides. Never force bulbs down into the soil. Fill container with more moist potting soil and press it lightly around the bulbs. When finished, the tips of the bulbs should be just above the soil surface, and there should be about a ½” of space between top of soil and the container rim.

Place your planted bulbs in a cool place with low light. The ideal temperature is about 50°. After flower buds are visible, move into room temperature and bright, but not direct, light. Turn container occasionally so that growth is even. Feed occasionally with a liquid fertilizer.