

It's Bulb-planting Time

Bulbs are a balm to the frozen soul after a long Nebraska winter. Those first snowdrops and crocus peeking through last year's old leaves—or through the snow—can't help but put a smile on your face and allow an exhalation of breath: we made it. Cool, fleshy, green-growing leaves coming out of the drab March soil... bulbs would be wonderful even if they didn't bloom. And what a variety. There's a wide array of colors, shapes, sizes, forms and bloom times—from a dainty, early squill (*Scilla bifolia*) to a bold red 'Kingsblood' Late Flowering Tulip. Bulbs can range in height from 2-30 inches and give you bloom from February to late May. You can plant straight species or any of the hundreds of named cultivars.

Bulb planting is an act of future promise. Working with your hands in the soil is good for the soul, and planting bulbs is probably the last you'll do of it until spring, so take advantage of your final opportunity of the year to play in the dirt. This year more than ever, we need that connection, the solace that relating to the natural world brings. It's an activity that can be done safely, outdoors, with your children. Or plant them for an older friend or relative who will welcome the company now and the color in the spring.

Why bulbs?

- Bulbs are cheap. And because of that, don't buy cheap bulbs. For a few pennies more you'll get top size bulbs from the best growers and better bloom the first year. Next to growing your flowers from seed, they're the best bang for your buck that you can find.
- Bulbs are easy. And because they're very forgiving, if you dig a hole and stick one in, you'll probably do fine. But it is worth a few extra minutes to prepare the soil and add compost or some sort of fertilization.
- Bulbs are almost NO maintenance. We're all busy and want low-maintenance plants. Beyond the work of planting them, all you need to do is cut off the spent blooms to prevent the plant from putting energy into unwanted reproduction instead of putting it into the actual bulb (which is the food storage for next year's growth). Be sure to leave all foliage until it browns or pulls easily from the ground. The leaves are how the plant gets the energy from the sun to make its food.

When planting, I like to dig out the area up to six inches deeper than the final planting depth of the bulb. I mix the removed soil with compost and/or a good organic bulb fertilizer. Bone meal, once the standard bulb fertilizer, is no longer recommended as it has been so thoroughly processed as to have almost all its nutrients destroyed. Technically, as food storage systems, bulbs should come with all the food they need for the first blooming cycle already in them. Still, I like to take advantage of the one time when I have everything dug up. Then I refill the planting hole a bit higher than the planting depth (the mix will settle) and lay out the bulbs. This puts the compost and fertilizer where it's needed, in the root zone. Fill the rest of the soil mix back in and mark the planting. Water the bulbs in well.

When you buy bulbs, they usually come with literature providing the proper planting depth and spacing, but a good rule is 3x the height of the bulb for depth and 3x the diameter of the bulb for on-center spacing. I like to put bulbs a little closer than recommended for a knockout bed. Massed plantings work best; anything besides the "little soldiers" lined up and spread out in a row is fine. You can use bulbs in stand-alone plantings or incorporate them into herbaceous beds. Adding them to flower beds helps to deal with what some gardeners see as a problem: the browning foliage when bloom is finished and the bare space left behind. You can eliminate this concern if you plant your bulbs among late-emerging perennials like hosta, hibiscus, butterflyweed and balloonflower or plant annuals as the bulbs fade.

If your bulbs went into winter without a lot of moisture and it's a warm dry spring, give the little guys a deep watering as the season starts. When your bulbs are finished blooming, be sure to snip off those spent blossoms but leave the foliage to "ripen" completely before removing it. Other than that, a possible topdressing of bulb fertilizer or compost in the fall should be all your bulbs need.

If you can think of any reason not to plant bulbs, I sure would like to hear it.



Snowdrops may bloom as early as February, and right through the snow.

