

Start Gardening Series

7 Bulbs

Bulbs are an essential part of every garden. For reward without effort, they surely take the first prize. Many of them will grow in either full sun or shade and in practically any soil providing it is not waterlogged. With the minimum of attention, they will go on and on producing flowers year after year.

Buying Bulbs

When purchasing bulbs, it is essential to buy the best quality available. Look out for large bulbs, as these will provide the biggest and best flowers. Do not be tempted by bargains, as these can often be undersized and inferior in quality. With bulbs, the term 'you get what you pay for' is very true. Inspect the bulbs if they are loose, making sure that they are firm and that there is no sign of damage or rot. With small bulbs, like miniature daffodils and snowdrops, it is important to plant immediately as these are the first to dehydrate in the warmth of a garden centre.

Bulbs in Containers

Autumn is the time to plant tubs, window boxes, pots and containers in general with bulbs, which will give a cheerful spring display. Hyacinth, crocus, dwarf varieties of narcissi and the shorter types of tulips are especially suitable.

First fill the bottom of the container with pieces of broken polystyrene or old broken pottery to prevent the drainage holes from becoming blocked. Fill the container with a free-draining compost. Once the display has finished and before the foliage dies down, the bulbs can be lifted and planted elsewhere in the garden to build up their reserves for the following year.



This frees up your containers to be planted with summer flowering plants.

Bulb Planting

Late summer or early autumn is the best time to plant springflowering bulbs. Plant summer-flowering bulbs in spring. Bulbs grow best in soil that is well drained and contains a reasonable amount of organic matter. However, any manure that is dug in before planting must be completely rotted. Organic fertilisers are best. The usual rule is to plant bulbs, using a trowel, in holes three times deeper than their height, that is, a 15cm hole for bulbs 5cm in height.

Suggested spacings should be taken as a rough guide, for irregular planting gives a more pleasing effect than plants grown in precisely spaced rows. Just bear the recommended spacing in mind when placing the bulbs on the ground in random order before planting. Small groups of bulbs always look better than single plants.

Clear the ground of all weeds first so that the soil will not have to be disturbed again after planting. Where bulbs and spring bedding are grown together, plant

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the biennials first. Leave the spaces for groups of bulbs to be planted afterwards. Generally bulbs should be planted as soon as possible after you have purchased them. An exception to this rule is tulips, which are best planted late in the season – November is ideal. Bulbs should be planted while they are still firm and preferably without any sign of growth.

Feeding

If you are growing bulbs in containers it is most important to use a liquid feed. Once the food reserves of the compost are completely exhausted, you will need to use a liquid feed or even a slow-release feed to sustain the bulbs. If the quality of your soil in your garden is good and if you mulch with well-rotted compost or manure there is very little need for feeding outdoors. A light application of a general fertilizer after flowering can help restore flowering energy for the following year.

After Flowering

After flowering it is very important to allow the bulb to restore its energy so that it can multiply and flower for



the following year. It is also a good idea to deadhead (remove the dead flowers) so that energy is not wasted on developing seedpods. Do not cut or remove the foliage as this is the bulb's way of manufacturing nutrients to be stored within the bulb. To remove the foliage will only weaken the developing bulb.

Naturalising Bulbs

The term naturalising means planting bulbs in grass or under trees where they can be left undisturbed for many years. Crocus and narcissi are favourites for this purpose. Snowdrops look good when planted beside a hedge or under a deciduous shrub. Although bulbs can be naturalised in a lawn, a rougher area is better as the grass will have to be left uncut until the bulb foliage dies down. This can take as long as 5-6 weeks after the flowers have finished. Aim for a natural, informal effect. To do this, scatter the bulbs at random over the area to be planted, mixing different sorts if you like and plant them where they fall. Avoid the temptation to even out the spacings. For planting, there are special bulb planters that take out a neat core of soil. Alternatively, lift flaps of turf. Loosen the soil beneath with a hand fork and then replace the turf after planting.

