

Bulbs: Fall Planting for Spring Blooms

Overview: In order to enjoy spring-flowering bulbs like tulips, daffodils, paperwhites, crocus, and hyacinths, gardeners must remember to plan ahead and plant them in the fall months.

Materials:

- Bulb catalogs (print or online)
- Assorted spring flowering bulbs
- Trowel
- Garden space or containers that can overwinter

Approximate Time to Complete: 1 to 2 hours

Location: Outdoor

Ages: Ages 3+

Season: Fall

Instructions:

Spring -flowering bulbs are some of the most beloved plants of all time, including favorites like tulips, daffodils, paperwhites, crocus, and hyacinths. Blooming throughout the spring months, these special plants produce bright, cheery, and often fragrant flowers signaling the end of winter and heralding the return of warmer weather.

Unfortunately, once you see bulbs blooming, it is much too late to plant them in your own garden. Most spring-blooming bulbs need to experience a cold treatment to bloom and so they must be planted in mid to late fall to ensure a spectacular spring show.

1. Introduce young gardeners to bulbs. The term “bulb” is used loosely by gardeners to describe plants growing from an underground mass of food storage tissues. Bulbs store enough food to enable them to grow and flower with no additional nutrients during the first year. To help them relate to this concept, tell them the storage tissue is like the bulb’s lunch box- a big lunch box packed with enough food for the whole growing season! (Check out [Bulb Botany](#) if you want more details on bulb structure.)

2. Explain that many bulbs need a dose of winter to bloom. Spring-flowering or hardy bulbs are planted in the fall. The exact timing varies by region, but they need to be in the ground before it freezes. When first planted, the bulb will develop its roots. It then lies dormant during much of the winter, but will draw on stored energy to produce flowers and leaves when the weather begins to warm. Most spring-flowering bulbs must receive a certain amount of cold weather to bloom well. Some bulbs require fewer cold hours and less warming to bloom so their flowers will emerge earlier in the spring (like crocus).



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Others need longer cooling and warmer weather to emerge so will bloom later in the spring like tulips.

If a bulb is not exposed to the cold temperatures it needs, it will usually still send out leaves when the weather warms, but it may not bloom or will have fewer flowers on shorter stalks. There are many areas of the country without enough cold weather to successfully grow all bulbs. For instance, most tulips will not grow and bloom in many southern states unless you provide a supplemental cold treatment by placing bulbs in a refrigerated location before planting. (Learn more about [forcing bulbs indoors](#).) The Paperwhite narcissus, closely related to daffodils, is a good option for warmer climates because most do not require a long cold treatment.

3. With your young gardener, look through bulb catalogs (print or online) and pick out a few that you would like to try to grow. Cut out or print pictures of your favorites and create a dream bulb garden shopping list. On this list, add information about their temperature needs and/or preferred [USDA Plant Hardiness Zone](#) and then check to see if your climate is a good match to meet their growing requirements. The USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map was created to try and help gardeners determine plants that would grow well in their area and is based on average winter temperatures. Most bulb catalogs will provide information about the zones the bulb they sell will grow best in. [Click here](#) to find your zone on the map . Star the selections you think will grow best for you.

4. Take a tour of your garden and look for a good spot to plant bulbs. Bulbs prefer sunny locations with well-drained soil. If you cannot find a good location, bulbs can also be planted in containers, however if you experience extreme winters you may need to store your container gardens in an unheated garage to keep pots from getting too cold. Terra cotta pots especially will crack in freezing temperatures and should not be left outside when temperatures are below freezing. Additionally, since a pot is not as well insulated as the soil, the bulbs can also get too cold. Of course remember that the bulbs do need the cold temperatures to bloom, so they cannot be placed in a location that will stay too warm either.

5. Purchase some bulbs for your garden.* Healthy bulbs will feel firm when gently squeezed. Avoid buying bulbs that are squishy. Most likely these bulbs have not been stored properly, are dried out or perhaps rotted and will not grow well for you.

*Special Note: Most bulbs are poisonous to both people and animals, so this may not be a good activity for young children who are prone to putting everything in their mouth.



6. Plant your bulbs. Many bulbs will come with packaging detailing the recommended spacing and depth information. You can also find this information online if needed. In general most bulbs like to be planted 2 to 3 times as deep as they are tall. Water your bulbs and keep ground moist while temperatures are above freezing. Remember your bulbs are down there establishing their roots at this time. Do not over water! Bulbs can also rot if conditions are too wet.

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7. Wait for spring. Maybe make a few signs to remember where you planted them like “Bulbs at Work” when temperatures are above freezing and they are still making roots and “Bulbs Sleeping” when they are lying dormant.

8. Keep track of your temperatures and watch for spring growth. [Journey North](#) offers a program to track the sighting of tulip blooms across the country.

9. As the weather warms, enjoy your beauties! If you want to see if you can get them to grow again the next spring, make sure not to cut back the foliage until it dies back on its own. Once the plant grows to a mature size, it focuses on taking in nutrients and producing new food through photosynthesis. The food it does not use for daily life is stored away in the bulb for next year’s growth. Once the bulb has captured enough energy, the leaves will turn brown and die. The bulb will enter a dormant state through the summer, fall and winter months until it is time to grow again the next spring.

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