Spring Blooming Bulbs Brenda Ratzlaff, Master Gardener

Five types of bulbs

The word “bulb” is used as a generic term for plants that grow from five distinct types of underground structures as follows:

* True Bulbs (Hyacinth, Tulip, Daffodil) Tiny bulblets or bulbils attach themselves to the bulb. Dig bulbs and separate, gently remove tiny bulbs from basal plate. Plant bulblets in out-of-the-way spot till mature enough for bloom.
* Corms (gladiolus, crocus, freesia, calla lily)) To divide, separate cormels from main corm. Plant in an out-of-the-way place till corms are large enough to flower.
* Tubers (anemone (most), tuberous begonia, Florist cyclamen) – To divide, dig and separate large tuber into two or more sections, making sure each section has at least one or two growth points.
* Rhizomes (bearded Iris, agapanthus, canna lilies) Rhizomes produce new plants from growth points along their sides. To divide, break at narrowing points which seem to divide sections. Each “break” needs at least one growing point.
* Tuberous Roots – (daylily, ranunculus, dahlia) to divide, dig and cut apart so that each separated root has a growth bud.

Helpful tools when planting bulbs in the ground:

* Auger Drill (If you have good soil you can do up to 100-200 an hour)
* All Steel Bulb Planter

How to plant bulbs

* The depth is almost always determined by the size of the bulb. The general rule is 2-½ times the height of the bulb. For instance, a 2” tall tulip bulb would be planted about 5 inches deep.

When purchasing bulbs online

* Order early. This is important to get a good selection. Some bulbs, such as hyacinth and tulips need at least 6 weeks of chill in the refrigerator before planting.
* Sun or shade? Do these bulbs need full sun (at least 6 hours a day)? Do I have that much sun where I want to plant? In regard to those with a shady garden, it’s often possible to plant in pots where they can be placed in full sun. Bulbs won’t die if planted in the shade, but they may not produce flowers.
* The size of the bulb determines the size of the flower (and stem). Bulb size is measured in centimeters. The larger the bulb, the larger the size of the flower and stem. For example, tulips top size in a given variety is 12 cm with 10 cm being an acceptable size by some growers. Compare like bulbs with size and price.
* When purchasing locally, normally on the shelves around Labor Day. Purchase as early as possible and store them in a cool, dark place (so they think it’s still a resting period).
* Some bulbs, e.g., tulips and hyacinth need winter chill so it’s important to order early for those bulbs.
* NOTE: Tulips and hyacinth need winter chill for best bloom. Many growers have recently been saying daffodils need winter chill. Purchase bulbs around Labor Day and \*chill in refrigerator in vented bag for at least six weeks prior to planting. Move directly from refrigeration to pot or ground.
* \*IMPORTANT: While bulbs are being stored in refrigerator it is important that no fruits are stored in same refrigerator.

Storing bulbs after bloom from pots

After bulbs have finished blooming, whether in the ground or in a pot, continue watering, as usual. When all foliage has yellowed completely stop watering. They may now be removed from the pot or ground. An easy way to know if bulbs are ready to be stored, or entered their rest, the yellowed foliage will be very easily pulled away. When soil is dry remove bulbs, brushing away loose soil. Allow to dry in open air for several days before storing in sand in a cool, dry place until ready to chill in the fall or planting next season.

Note: Many growers suggest disposing of tulips in zone 9 and above rather than saving them.

Poisonous bulbs (not a complete list)

* Daffodils (Narcissus) known as “The Harbingers of Spring”
* Tulips – contain allergenic lactones, similar to hyacinth (when eaten)Hyacinth
* Autumn crocus contains Colchicum. Colchicine is used for gouty arthritis. Very poisonous.
* Amaryllis (Hippeastrum)
* Gladiolus
* Iris
* Alliums
* Galanthus nivalis (Snowdrop) contain alkaloids. In a number of countries, the alkaloid galantamine has been approved for use in managing Alzheimer’s.
* Lilies There are dangerous and benign lilies. The dangerous ones can be fatal, especially to cats. These include true lilies, including Tiger lilies, Day lilies and Asiatic lilies.

Forcing Bulbs in soil

* Choose right container
* Fill the container two-thirds full of a moistened potting soil. Bulbs like moist soil, but not wet soil.
* Place bulbs on top of the soil, touching each other. Cover with more soil until the tips are visible.
* Water the soil, being careful to not overwater. After planting, maintain a consistent level of moisture throughout growing time.
* Place bulbs in a cool, dark location until they begin to sprout. At this time, they may be moved to a brighter spot with indirect sunlight.
* After blooms have faded and yellowed, may be planted outdoors where they will bloom again the next spring.

Forcing Bulbs in water

* To grow bulbs in water, use a glass container like a forcing vase to support the bulb ensuring that the roots touch the water while the bulb remains dry. Place the container in a cool, dark, place for 8-12 weeks to encourage root growth, then move to a cool, bright window to promote blooming. Replace the water weekly, and for bulbs that need a cold treatment, such as hyacinths or daffodils, refrigerate them the required period before forcing.

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Make your own potting soil:

1 part peat

1 part potting soil

1 part compost

1 part builders’ sand

Fertilizer according to pkg instructions