

Outdoor Bulbs: Tulips, Daffodils and Crocus

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Plant your spring-flowering bulbs now, enjoy next year

Winter isn't upon us yet (at least not quite!), and already it's time to dream of drifts of color to celebrate the coming of spring. And what better way to do that than with spring-flowering bulbs.

Late October is a great time to plant spring-flowering bulbs in the Skagit Valley--early enough that the bulbs develop a good root system before the ground freezes but not so early that the bulbs try to bloom before winter sets in.

But what to plant? For a dramatic display, peruse the pages of nursery catalogs for the seemingly infinite variations of daffodils or choose from the dazzling array of hybrid tulips that have been bred for interesting shapes and patterns. Hybrid tulips come in early-, mid-, and late-spring blooming varieties so you can have tulips popping from late March to early May.

Small flowers with a big presence

For naturalistic plantings, choose the smaller species tulips such as 'Lilac Wonder' and 'Persian Pearl' and dwarf daffodils such as 'February Gold' and 'Tete a Tete'. All spread by seed and offsets if you plant them and leave them alone. Other bulbs for naturalizing are glory-of-the-snow (*Chionodoxa luciliae*), snowdrop (*Galanthus nivalis*), grape hyacinth (*Muscari armeniacum*), scilla (*Scilla siberica*), checkered lily (*Fritillaria meleagris*) and camas (*Camassia leichtlinii*). Crocus (*Crocus* spp.) also naturalize well. Although they are technically corms, they are often lumped in with bulbs.

Be aware when you are deciding on your spring-flowering bulbs that deer enjoy a tulip snack but stay away from daffodils. Daffodil sap contains needle-sharp crystals of calcium oxalate, which burn the mouth and damage internal organs. According to naturalist Russell Link, deer are also less partial to crocus and checkered lily.

Other than snowdrop, checkered lily, and camas, which tolerate damp conditions, bulbs don't like to get overly wet or they may get diseased or rot. This means planting them in well-draining soil and a spot that does not receive excessive irrigation in the summer when they are dormant. (This need for water in the winter and no water in the summer makes spring-flowering bulbs an excellent choice for a waterwise garden as they are in tune with the natural cycles of precipitation here in the Skagit Valley.)

Best locations for bulbs

Plant your spring-flowering bulbs in an area that will get at least some sun when they bloom. Under deciduous trees is a good choice, because the bulbs will provide interest before the trees leaf out and there is no need to water under the trees in the summer if nothing else is growing there. Plant at least 5 to 7 bulbs of one variety together for punch, and consider mass plantings of 25 to 30 bulbs or more to create a carpet of color.

Choose firm, dry, large bulbs as the larger the bulb, the larger the bloom. Once you have purchased your bulbs, keep them in a cool, dry, dark place until you are ready to plant. Plant with the pointy end up three times as deep as the height of bulb and 3 to 5 inches apart depending on the size of the blooms. Work in a couple of tablespoons of bonemeal per bulb and water the bulbs after planting to get a good root system started.

If squirrels in your yard have the annoying habit of digging up your bulbs for snacks lay chicken wire over your plantings either on top of or just underneath the soil surface. You can remove the wire when the stems begin to poke through or experiment with leaving the stems to grow up through the wire.



Anacortes gardener Linda Zielinski uses old nursery trays to protect her bulbs from marauding squirrels. She removes the trays when green shoots appear. **Photo by Jane Billingham / Skagit County Master Gardeners**

Caring for bulbs after the blooms

Hybrid tulips are often treated as annuals and can be forgotten about or dug up after they are done blooming. A few, such as Darwin hybrids and Emperor tulips, are bred to return for several years. In this case, snap the flowers off the tops of the stems as the blooms begin to wilt and before the petals drop. Then continue watering until the leaves dry up and turn brown. The green leaves will feed new daughter bulbs that will grow to replace the spent bulb that has produced the bloom.



Above left: Linda Zielinski planting scilla bulbs in her Anacortes garden. Above right: Chard and tulips grow together in Linda Zielinski's spring garden. **Photos by Jane Billingham.**

Once the leaves are dead, cut them off at soil level with a knife and then keep the bulbs dry while they are dormant over the summer. You can do this either by making sure they are in a part of your landscape that does not get summer water or (if you have the time and the energy) you can dig up the bulbs in June and store them in a dry, well-ventilated space until it is time to plant them out again in the fall.

For all daffodils and bulbs for naturalizing there is no need to do anything as you want them to set seed and increase by bulb division. So, don't top them, leave the leaves to feed the bulbs, and remove the dead leaves only if the brown leaves are an eyesore in your garden.

Now is the time to thumb through the catalogs and visit local nurseries and bulb growers to decide which are the spring-flowering bulbs for you. Then pop them in the ground, cover them up, and wait for them to delight you in the spring.

References:

- WSU Spokane County Extension MG Fact Sheet C010, "Bulb Know How," <http://www.spokane-county.wsu.edu/Spokane/eastside/Fact%20Sheets/C010%20Bulb%20Know%20How%2005.pdf>
- WSU Clark County Extension, "Bulb 101", http://clark.wsu.edu/volunteer/mg/gm_tips/Bulbs101_2.html
- Valerie Easton, "Tiny Bulbs," *Pacific Northwest Magazine*, March, 2005, <http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/pacificnw/2005/0313/plant>



Above left: Camas naturalized in Naturescapes at the WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardener Discovery Garden on Memorial Highway in Mount Vernon. Above center: Deer contemplating a purple tulip snack in an Anacortes garden. Above right: Hybrid tulip showing off its colors. Tulips are always popular in the spring. **Photos by Jane Billingham.**