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*Advice to Grow By ... Ask Us!*

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## PLANT BULBS FOR SPRING FLOWERS

*By Jane Scurich, Marin Master Gardener*

My passion for "a host of golden daffodils" and other spring flowering bulbs began at an early age. Growing up in Memphis, Tennessee, my Dad owned a large "feed and seed" store in town. This was the 1950s, long before every hardware store, grocery and pharmacy sold bags of bulbs. I adored the fall when the "Dutchmen" arrived with their wooden crates filled with the promise of spring. This was a time when dedicated gardeners marked their calendars and lined up at the nursery to hand select the much sought after bulbs arriving from Holland. I also looked forward to my new pair of wooden shoes, as the "Dutchmen" brought bulbs to my Dad, and always remembered to bring wooden shoes for my brother and me, one size larger each year.

I remember marveling that these tiny dull brown packages could deliver bright red tulips, as tall as me, just in time for Easter egg hunts. A true bulb consists of a tiny, fully formed plant within a package of fleshy scales. Not all of what we commonly refer to as bulbs actually qualify in this category, but most of the general wisdom in selection remains the same: look for solid, heavy, disease free plant material and you will be rewarded.

Poring over the glossy bulb catalogues that arrive in summer adds to my anticipation of spring. The pages are well dog-eared before I finally whittle down my wish list so as not to require re-financing my house to plant my garden! One of the advantages of the large bulb catalogues is that they offer a wide variety of bulbs with a range of flowering times, such as early, mid and late spring and in heights ranging from 8" to 30". Careful planning will provide you with a long and colorful bulb season. They also offer a variety of lesser-known bulbs and it's always fun to experiment with something new. Camassia, also known as Indian hyacinth, supports hundreds of deep blue star-shaped flowers on airy spikes some 2-3' tall. Three bulbs I planted five years ago have naturalized under a lemon tree and put on a wonderful show in early summer. Ixia, a native of Africa, is one of my favorites for cut flowers. A tiny corm, not a true bulb, sends up 12-15" slender spikes of small, funnel shaped flowers in a variety of colors in late spring. At a luncheon I attended last year, the centerpieces were masses of Ixia, stems cut short and placed in squat, round glass bowls—very eye catching.

I prefer to order bulbs from a trusted Holland bulb house, but choices for size, selection and price is far from limited in our local stores. There probably is some wisdom in "you get what you pay for" when it comes to bulbs. Top size bulbs, which in turn, deliver strong stems and large flowers, will generally be more costly than the smaller bulbs of the same variety. Most of our local nurseries carry a large selection of top quality bulbs. You will also find bins and bins of discount price bulbs in many of the home supply centers. While you may carefully pick out the largest, most solid bulbs and be rewarded with a fabulous spring show, you may also be in for some surprises. A dear friend of mine and fellow master gardener recently said, "Jane, you know I would NEVER intentionally plant orange gladiolas, but I have 15 of them growing in my garden!" She continued with some good news, "... and they look great!" So, if you are willing to be surprised, or have a very casual color scheme in mind, pick through the discount bins and enjoy the blooms. For those of you with a strict color plan, and a bloom schedule, I would advise spending a little more money getting just what you want.

So, a few suggestions - shop early for premium, top size bulbs. Look for firm bulbs with no soft spots or mildew. Get acquainted with several bulb catalogues either on-line or in print form. And If an offer sounds too good to be true, e.g., "25 top quality daffodils for naturalizing for \$5," it probably is.