

Planting Bulbs

Q & A 08-30-2016:

Q.I would like to add some bulbs to my yard but I am not sure how to get started?

A: Bulbs are an easy way to add color to your yard without a lot of maintenance and now is a good time to start looking for fall planted bulbs. I have iris and daffodil bulbs in my yard and do very little to maintain them over the year and they always brighten up the yard every spring with showy blooms. I don't water or fertilize them, and only divided them every few years.

There are many kinds of bulbs that are relatively carefree additions to the garden, particularly if you choose natives and/or ones that adapt easily to our climate. Since fall is the best time to plant winter, spring, and even some summer-blooming bulbs, use the following basic tips to make your investment in bulbs pay off for years to come.

First, choose wisely. Look for big, firm, clean bulbs that don't show any evidence of browning or rotting (soft spots). Larger, more mature bulbs usually produce more flowers than small ones. Some of the easiest bulbs to find and plant now include anemone, allium, freesia, hyacinth, tulip and narcissus. But don't limit yourself to the nursery and big-box store standbys. There are a number of lovely native bulbs, like the), Harvest Brodiaea (*brodiaea elegans*) and Purplehead or blue dicks (*dichelostemma capitatum*). If you are interested in California native bulbs check out the photos and growing habits at the California Native Plant Society's website: cnps.org, which also recommends nurseries and other sources for buying bulbs. Our local Chapter of the California Native Plant Society also sometimes have bulbs at their fall sale. Their fall sale will be October 8th this year.

The second thing to keep in mind is that soil matters. Like most plants, bulbs prefer well-drained soil. Plant in raised beds or on a slope if you have dense clay or compacted soil. Or, amend soil with good compost or other organic material before planting. Don't just amend the hole you are planting the bulb in as UC studies have shown that amending soil in just the hole you dig for the plant doesn't do much good in the long run. If you're going to amend, do it in a larger area, like an entire garden bed. Some bulbs like narcissus and daffodils the gophers leave alone. But to keep gophers from snacking on your other types of bulbs you may need to plant them in cages made from hardware cloth.

Another important tip is to follow instructions when planting. Planting depth and direction bulb is planted do matter. While all types of bulbs need to be planted with the growth points up and the roots down, it is not always easy to tell which end is which, so rely on the package instructions for correct positioning. Planting depth varies among different types of bulbs, but the general rule of thumb is two to three times the height of the bulb.

Lastly, after planting mostly forget about your bulbs. Moisten the soil when you plant the bulb, then let the fall and winter rains take over. If we experience dry spells in the colder months, water sparingly. Too much watering will cause bulbs to rot.

The exception to this is the summer-blooming bulbs, they will require more water, since their active growth coincides with dry, hot weather. No need to fertilize. Healthy, mature bulbs store all of the nutrients needed for the upcoming season's growth and bloom. After blooming, you can add a light fertilizer to help replenish the stored nutrients, ensuring a vibrant flower show again next year.

After the bulbs are done blooming, fight the urge to snip off unsightly foliage. Bulbs use this time to continue photosynthesis in order to replenish nutrients for next year's bloom. If you can't stand the sight of fading leaves, plant bulbs among other perennials or annuals that will hide the foliage.