

Spring Blooming Bulbs - Planting, Growing, Dividing

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October and November are the months to plant spring blooming bulbs. In Tahoe, bulbs can be planted directly in the ground without pre-chilling as gardeners in warm climates often do. Our winters do the chilling for us. As long as the soil is not frozen, bulbs can be planted.

Soil

Like most plants, bulbs need well-drained soil. Most will quickly rot in soggy soil. If your soil drains poorly, consider planting on a slope or in raised beds. Loosen the soil past the root depth and amend it with some compost or other organic material before planting.

Sun

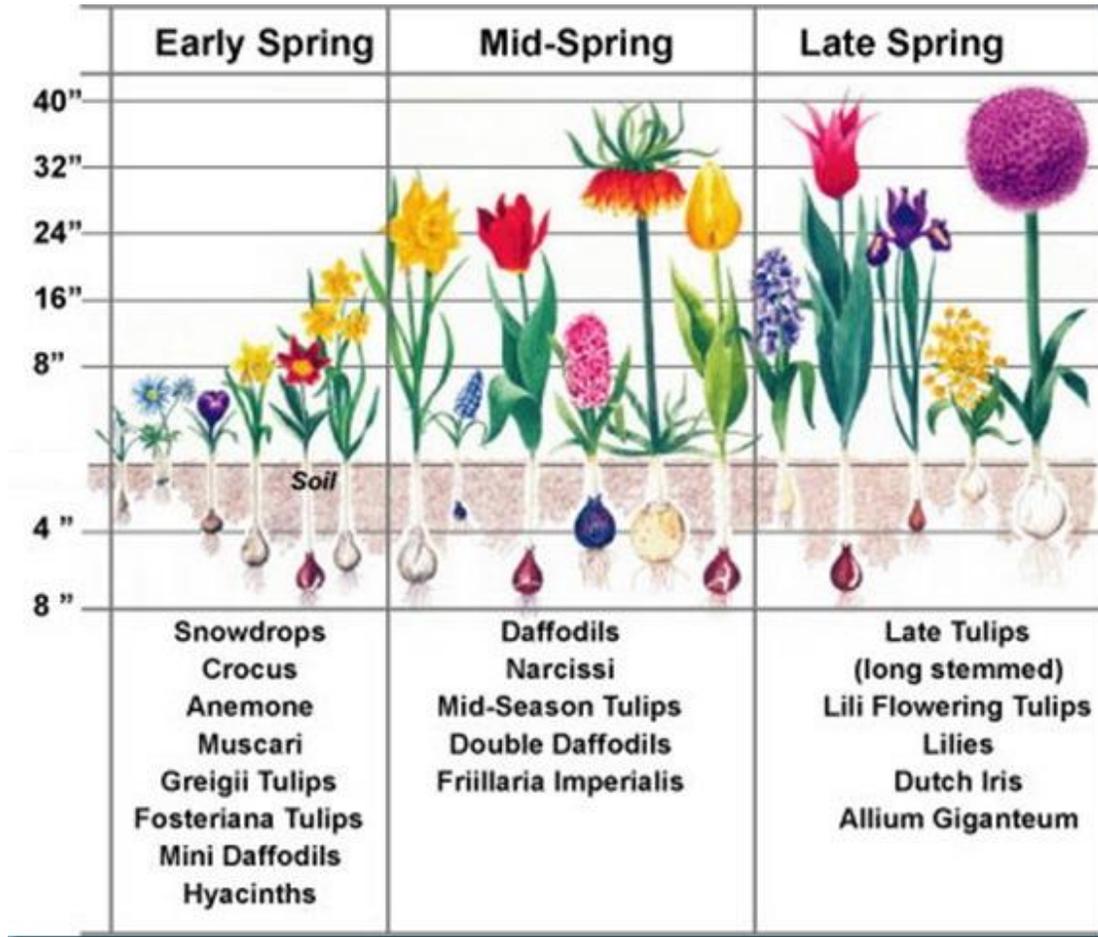
Most fall planted bulbs can take five to six hours of daily full sun when they bloom in the spring. They will even bloom well under deciduous trees, if the trees won't leaf out until the bulbs finish blooming. Some woodland bulbs, such as fritillaria, prefer light shade.

Selecting

Choose the biggest! Generally, you'll get more blooms from the most mature bulbs. Be aware that pre-packaged bulbs, though less expensive, are usually smaller and may produce less reliable blooms. Choose healthy bulbs. Look for heavy, dense bulbs with

no decay, mold, or fungus. Shop early in the season for best selection and before the bulbs suffer from mishandling and high temperature storage. Buy bulbs labeled “commercially propagated” or “from cultivated stock.”

Soil Depths and Typical Blooming Times for Various Bulbs



Planting

Plant all types of bulbs with the growth points ‘up’ and the root scars ‘down.’ True bulbs and corms have obvious points, but tubers don’t. Ranunculus tubers have fleshy fingers that go ‘down.’ Anemone tubers show little clues, but look for the slight depression left by last year’s stem. Plant it stem scar ‘up.’

Planting depths vary; but, generally, most true bulbs, corms and tubers should be planted three times as deep as the bulb is wide. In heavy clayish soils, a little more shallow. Refer to the chart above. In loose soils or raised beds, a little deeper. Rhizomes, just under the soil surface. Tuberous roots, shallowly, with growth points covered by about three or four inches of soil.

Fertilizer

Healthy, mature bulbs contain all the nutrients needed for the current season's growth and bloom. The main reason to add fertilizer is to help replenish the stored nutrients, ensuring a good flower show next year. Some bulb formulas, such as phosphorus-rich bone meal or a 5-10-10 complete fertilizer, are designed to be dug into the soil, well under the root zone, prior to planting. In established bulb gardens, Sunset Western Garden Book recommends applying potassium into the soil near the roots, watering in well.

Water

Bulbs need water while they're actively growing. Pre-moisten the soil prior to planting for good root development. Provide irrigation to fall planted bulbs until winter rains take over. Spring planted bulbs will need summer irrigation until the foliage dies back. Water deeply, enough to penetrate the root zone.

Repeat Bloom

By the end of a bulb's blooming season it has used up all of its stored nutrients. In order to build back up its reserves for next year's flowering, it must remain in the soil. Most importantly, the leaves must continue to gather as much sunlight as possible, so don't cut those leaves! By allowing the foliage to "ripen" naturally, you'll be insuring more blooms next year!! The following bulbs are some of the most reliable repeat bloomers in our climate: daffodils, California native iris, Muscari (grape hyacinth), scilla, and "species" tulips. Many others perform well. Look for descriptions that say "multiples" or "best for naturalizing."



Pests

Bulbs have very few "bug" pests. Snails may nibble foliage and even blossoms. Trap, handpick, or try one of the new less toxic baits. Squirrels and other rodents may dig and eat bulbs (except daffodils!). If you have trouble with gophers, mice, voles, or squirrels, then plant in "cages" made from 1/4- to 1/2-inch metal mesh. Containers and mesh-lined raised beds are another solution.

Dividing bulbs

Hardy bulbs sometimes need to be divided. After a number of years in the garden, some daffodils and other bulbs produce offsets that cluster around the base of the parent bulb. Crowded foliage and diminished flowering are signs that the bulb clumps need to be divided. After the leaves die back, dig up the bulbs and carefully separate the offsets from the parents. Replant the bulbs immediately or store them in a cool, dry place until bulb-planting time in the fall. Plant the offsets twice as deep as their height; don't plant them as deep as mature bulbs. Small offsets will take a few years to reach blooming size.

Some corms, such as gladiolus, crocus, and freesia, produce small structures called cormels around their base, similar to the offsets of bulbs. These can be removed and replanted to increase your supply. When plants are dormant, remove the cormels. Immediately replant cormels of hardy plants like crocus and colchicum. For tender plants like gladiolus, store the corms and cormels in a cool, dry place over winter and plant in spring.

For scaly bulbs like lilies, you can dig the bulbs in spring and remove the small scales that form around the outside. Replant immediately.



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