



Plant Bulbs Now for Spring Blooms

by Sharon Plein, UC Master Gardener

Fall is the perfect time to plant bulbs for spring. Surprisingly, bulbs are incredibly water-efficient. This is because many varieties begin their growth cycle during periods of adequate rainfall and complete their life cycles before high temperatures and water demands begin. Concerns about water conservation need not be a major factor in planting a bulb garden.

Bulbs and bulb-like plants include a variety of perennial flora. A few of the most popular spring flowering bulbs in the Central Valley are daffodils, which come in an amazing variety of sizes and colors, hyacinths, freesias, tulips, crocus, and ranunculus. The bulbs that become these flowers are thickened underground storage organs that contain the nutrients needed to complete their life cycles. They only need a combination of soil temperature and moisture to trigger growth and adequate care after blooming to ensure next year's bloom.

Not all bulbs are satisfactory "repeat performers," however. Tulips, for example, do not like the valley's heat. If you insist on growing tulips, dig them up after they have bloomed and store them in a cool dry place for replanting in the following fall season. Other bulbs are sensitive to soil pH and our arid climate. Good bulbs to stick with in this area are daffodils, freesias, and hyacinths. These are stand-outs in my garden and appear year after year in increasing numbers. They are also good choices for a first time bulb gardener.

Where and how to plant bulbs are important considerations. Be sure to plan ahead by selecting a garden space and the varieties of bulbs for color and height that fit into your landscape plan. Choose a spot that has well-drained soil and offers "camouflage" for the bulbs after flowering. After blooming, the bulbs will enter their "unsightly stage." At this point, the foliage begins to yellow and wither, while underground, the bulbs are storing water and nutrients for the next season. Removing foliage before it has yellowed and can be easily pulled off compromises next year's growth and bloom.

Don't forget where you have planted spring blooming bulbs. Take a photo or draw a diagram of areas where your bulbs are planted in your garden to avoid over-planting or accidentally digging them up later in the season.

When you have picked a good spot to feature your spring bulbs, it's time to get planting. Begin by digging holes or trenches that are three times as deep as the diameter of the bulbs. The broad end of a mattock, hand spades, or bulb planters sold in nurseries and hardware stores are all effective digging tools. I have a handy auger that I use in a cordless drill to complete my digging effortlessly.



From these bulbs,



come white daffodils.



Use a mattock to break up the ground for planting.

When in doubt, measure it out. Most packages of bulbs include instructions for depth of planting and include a handy paper ruler. Planting at the proper depth is important for bulb success. Consider clustering the same varieties of bulbs to give an effect to the landscape that is more attractive than planting single bulbs in straight lines or rows. The planting holes or trenches for the bulbs should be U-shaped. A tablespoon of bone meal or superphosphate mixture for each bulb placed in the planting hole will give added nutrients for next year's growth. The bulb should be placed in contact with the soil and amendments, and then watered thoroughly after the bulbs are covered with soil.

In a few weeks, you will notice the leaves poking above the soil surface. In periods of extreme drought, like the one we are currently experiencing, it may be necessary to water the bulbs periodically during the growing and blooming period. Mulching the planting area will help conserve soil moisture. After blooming, and again in the following spring, an application of a complete fertilizer or bulb food will encourage the next year's blooms.

Planting spring bulbs in your garden is a gift that keeps on giving. With a little bit of planning and effort, you will be rewarded by the sight of spring blooms year after year. These plants are not only beautiful, but also water efficient additions to your garden.



From these Tubers,



come colorful ranunculus.

November 27, 2014