

Basic Tips for Planting Bulbs

By Rachel Oppedahl

Ten years ago I planted about a dozen daffodil bulbs in my front yard. Every year since, those beautiful bloomers have multiplied, creating drifts of yellow, white and orange while the rest of the garden is still sleeping. And the best part is, I have done absolutely nothing to make that annual spring show happen. I haven't watered or fertilized them, and I've never once divided them.

Many bulbs are relatively carefree additions to the garden, particularly if you choose natives and/or ones that adapt easily to the Sierra foothills' soil and 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.



Choose Bulbs 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 Tuolumne Fawnlily (*erythronium tuolumnense*), Harvest Brodiaea (*brodiaea elegans*) and Purplehead (*dichelostemma capitatum*). Check out the photos and growing habits of these and other indigenous plants at the California Native Plant Society's website: cnps.org, which also recommends nurseries and other sources for buying native plants.

Soil Matters. Like most plants, bulbs prefer well-drained soil. If you have dense clay or compacted soil, try planting bulbs on a slope or in raised beds. Or, amend garden soil with good compost or other organic material before planting. (Note: 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. Then, be sure to add compost to the top, around plants, annually.)

Plant Per Instructions. 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. Again, look to the specific planting instructions either provided on the package or in a good gardening resource such as Sunset's *Western Garden Book* or the University of California Extension's California Garden Web at cagardenweb.ucanr.edu.

Water Sparingly Until Active Growth. Moisten the soil when you plant the bulb, then let the fall and winter rain and snow take over. If we experience dry spells in the colder months, water sparingly. Too much watering will cause bulbs to rot. One exception: summer-blooming bulbs often require more water, since their active growth coincides with dry, hot weather.

Fertilize Little or Not at All. 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.

Deter the Pests. Gophers, squirrels and other rodents make quick meals out of bulbs (except daffodils, which they avoid), so either buy or make wire "gopher cages" to protect the bulbs when you plant them.

Let the Plant Prepare for Next Year. After the plant blooms and the leaves start turning yellow, fight the urge to snip off unsightly foliage. Bulbs use up all of their stored nutrients during the growing season and must rely on their leaves 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 evergreen perennials that will hide the foliage.

One of the best things about planting bulbs is the delayed and sometimes surprising gratification they bring. Tuck them in your garden now, and four to six months later, when you've almost forgotten all about them, they will put on a show that ushers in spring.

Rachel Oppedahl is a University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardener of Tuolumne County who loves her old garden friends.