



ASK A MASTER GARDENER

BUYING QUALITY SPRING FLOWER BULBS

By Trish Grenfell, Placer County Master Gardener

Q Some of the flower bulbs I have purchased in the past haven't done so well, despite being planted in the correct soil & light. What should I look for when choosing bulbs at the store? And are the bulbs I forgot to plant last fall good enough to plant this year?

A Good question since this is the time to be buying flower bulbs that will bloom in the spring. And quality is very important. Try planting last year's unused bulbs, but best to place them where it is not important to have a good flower show. You would be lucky to have any results, let alone quality flowers. Believe me; I have tried it!

There are a few guidelines for you to follow to avoid a sub-par display next spring. When it comes to bulbs, bigger is better. That's because larger bulbs simply have more volume to store nutrients and moisture. They're also able to weather storage and handling better than smaller ones. And the best thing is that the big bulbs produce bigger and more blooms.

Do the bulbs feel solid, firm, heavy for their size? These bulbs are generally free of fungal diseases and excessive drying, but there are some tuberous roots and rhizomes that look dry and withered—but that's normal, so don't hold that against them. Mold may appear as a discoloration or may be indicated only by the softness of the bulb. Bulbs should also be free of bruises and cuts—these are ready sites for disease and insect invasion. Inspect the bulbs closely for signs of disease or insects.

Bulbs that are dormant won't have any sprouts, so its early growth will focus on developing a strong root system first, and that's good. Avoid purchasing bulbs that have already started to sprout, or plant them immediately. Buy bulbs when they first appear in at your favorite nursery and store them under ideal conditions if necessary until planting time arrives. That means keeping them in a cool, dry place in breathable bags, not in plastic. According to the North Carolina Horticultural Dept., temperatures higher than 70° F will damage the flower inside spring-flowering bulbs. Rhizomes, tubers, and tuberous roots are more easily desiccated than bulbs and corms, and should be stored in peat, perlite, or vermiculite.

Look for bulbs that are sold individually before buying the packaged ones because you can choose the best of the best, whereas in the packages, you get what you get.

All that's left is to plant them between Halloween and Thanksgiving, water them in, and wait for the show to begin!

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