



ASK A MASTER GARDENER

PLANTING BULBS IN THE FALL FOR SPRING COLOR

By Peggy Beltramo & Trish Grenfell, Placer County Master Gardeners

Q The garden centers are now selling bulbs. When should I plant them and which will provide the best color for this area?

A Your first question is easy: PLANT THEM NOW! The optimum time to plant them in our area is October and November.

When we think of spring color, we often think of masses of tulips, hyacinths and daffodils, but there are many other choices. Tulips and hyacinths give a great show the first year, but our climate doesn't provide the winter chilling needed for repeat blooming in subsequent years. If you want to grow them, you will have to treat them as annuals and replant each fall.

Daffodils however return year after year and therefore their bright yellow blooms cheer us wherever we go every spring. But they are not the only bulb heroes that thrive in our foothill gardens and return to greet us every year in increasing numbers.

Medium/tall choices are alliums (ornamental onions), amaryllis, peonies, fritillaries, Dutch iris, and watsonias.

For a more delicate look, consider crocus, freesias (wonderful fragrance), ixias (corn lilies), leucojums (snowflakes), lycoris (hurricane lilies), montbretias (crococsmia), muscari (grape hyacinths), paperwhites, ranunculus, *Galanthus nivalis* (snowdrops), sparaxis (harlequin flowers), or *Erythronium americanum* (dog-tooth violets). These minor bulbs are small plants that look impressive in mass plantings and increase in number year after year.

Plant bulbs where they will receive at least six hours of sun a day. Check the instructions that come with the bulbs as to planting depth. A very general rule of thumb is that bulbs should be planted twice as deep as the bulb is high, but there are exceptions: daffodils need to be planted deeper, and bulbs such as grape hyacinths and crocus can be planted just below the soil surface. Blend compost into the planting soil until the mix is approximately one-third compost. Supplemental fertilizing may not be necessary. Test your soil if you are concerned about nutrient deficiencies. If deficient in phosphorous, add bone meal to the planting hole as per the instructions on the package; it is necessary to develop sturdy root systems and stimulate plant growth. If gophers and squirrels are a problem in your area, line planting holes with chicken wire to deter them.

Now go shopping at a nursery or in a bulb catalog and find a few new bulbs. Planting bulbs is one of the rewarding and relaxing rituals of fall.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION



PLACER COUNTY

11477 E Avenue
Auburn, CA 95603
(530) 889-7385

E-Mail: ceplacer@ucdavis.edu

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NEVADA COUNTY

255 So Auburn
Grass Valley, CA 95945
(530) 273-4563

E-Mail: cenevada@ucdavis.edu