

Planting Spring-Flowering Bulbs Outdoors

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Guide H-413

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Spring-flowering bulbs add bright colors to home landscapes earlier than annual flowers and earlier than most perennial flowers. Most will bloom and multiply for years without a great deal of care. They can be planted in beds within gardens or lawns, used as border plants, planted around trees, or grown in pots or window boxes.

Buy spring-flowering bulbs as soon as they appear in the store. Most do best when planted in September and October; however, they can be planted later if the soil temperature is not below freezing. Planting in early fall encourages early root growth and earlier spring flowering.

Bulbs last longer in a sunny place, although they also do well under trees that lose their leaves in winter. At lower elevations in New Mexico, plant bulbs in cooler areas, such as the north or east side of the house. They grow best in porous soil that drains well, and that has good water- and nutrient-holding capacities. Loam or sandy loam soils are ideal. Heavy loam or clay soil needs an organic soil amendment such as peat moss, ground bark, or aged sawdust.

Planting depth for bulbs should be about three times their height—a little deeper in sandy soils and not quite as deep in heavy soils. Soil at the bottom of the hole should be level and loose so the bulb base can be placed firmly but gently in contact with the soil. Fertilizer should be mixed with the soil in the bottom of the hole, and covered with an inch of compost or soil before the bulb is deposited. Avoid fertilizers with a high nitrogen ratio. Fertilizers with a high ratio of phosphorus or potassium are usually best.

Bulbs can be thought of as pre-packaged plants, with embryo flowers, leaves, and roots all inside. Stems, leaves, and flowers will grow out of the top of the bulb during late winter and early spring. After flowering and while the leaves are green, foods are produced in the foliage and stored in the bulbs for

next spring's growth of flower, leaf, root, and stem. The parts above ground usually grow for 2 or 3 months, and should not be removed until they have turned brown. When the leaves and roots die, the bulb becomes dormant until fall when root growth starts again.

The bulb's roots should get enough nutrients to make sure the foliage produces the most food possible during its short season. During the second year, solid or water-soluble fertilizers can be applied as soon as the soil warms up in spring. When solid fertilizer is used, enough water should be applied to make sure it reaches the bulb's root system. Water-soluble fertilizers can be applied every 2 or 3 weeks. Organic fertilizers such as dried blood, composted manures, or sludge must be applied during fall so they will break down in time to release their nutrients by early spring.

Bulbs need plenty of moisture when they are actively growing. Remember, roots are quite deep in the ground and need more than light, surface watering. One good soaking is usually enough until the leaves appear. Continue watering after the bulbs finish blooming, keeping the soil moist, not wet, until the leaves turn yellow naturally.

Bulbs will multiply each year by producing new bulbs at the base of the mature bulb. For the first 2 or 3 years, this increases the number of flowers appearing in each location. After that, bulbs start to get overcrowded and produce fewer, smaller flowers. When this happens, the bulbs should be dug and divided. Dig the bulbs just before the leaves fade in late spring. Separate the clumps of bulbs and replant the largest, healthiest bulbs. If replanted in the same location, work a little extra fertilizer into the soil in the bottom of the hole. Extra bulbs can be planted in another location or shared with others.

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