



Bulbs 101

Whether you know a lot about bulbs or a little, there's always something more you can learn about them.

- Bulbs: Beauty In a Bottle

Bulbs are a natural product. And, as such, follow a natural cycle of growth and rebirth. Enjoying their fabulous flowers means planting ahead; simply "dig, drop, done" in one season then "delight" in the next. Bulbs are among the easiest flowers to grow and also the most stunningly colorful to enjoy. Even the most novice gardener can create a breathtakingly beautiful spring, summer and fall garden with bulbs.

- What's a Bulb?

A flower bulb is really a self-contained flower factory. Within this marvelous little package is nearly everything the flower needs to come to life! Split a tulip open, for instance, and you'll see its baby flower bud, leaves, roots, stem and food supply. All bulbs need from you is to be placed in the ground at the appropriate season of the year, given a liberal drink of water then left to work their magic.

- Variety of Bulbs

Flower bulbs come in a seemingly limitless variety which makes them perfectly suitable for any garden design you can dream up. Planting just a few can easily provide beautiful color in your garden for several months. Daffodils are the first sign of spring and dahlias will bloom until frost hits the pumpkins.

The three most important factors to keep in mind are color, of course, but also plant height and flowering period.

- When to Plant

In general, there are two seasons for bulb planting:

Fall

After soil temperatures are below 50°F/10°C. These bulbs bloom the following spring and require the cold winter temperatures for development. But let's say winter arrives and your bulbs are still in their bag. Not to worry! Bulbs are pre-programmed to grow so even if you have to plant through snow, plant your bulbs!

Spring

After the danger of frost has passed (tender bulbs love soil that is at least 60°F/15°C). These bulbs bloom in summer/fall.

- Where to Buy Bulbs

These days, you can buy bulbs just about anywhere:

- Garden centers
- Home centers

- Nursery, seed and farm stores
- Do-it-yourself centers
- Mass merchandisers
- Many hardware stores
- Supermarkets
- Catalog mail order
- The internet

- Buying Tips

The bigger the bulb, the bigger the flower.

Plan ahead. Make a list and include pictures from catalogs or magazines.

Consider your climate. Choose bulbs suited to grow and bloom in your area.

Read labels. Pre-packaged Dutch bulbs include planting instructions on their labels.

Inspect the bulbs. Healthy bulbs are generally firm bulbs.

Be wary of bargains. Steer clear of bulbs that are mushy or show signs of mold or fungus.

Shop early for best selection.

- How to Plant

Most bulbs thrive in either full or partial sun and in almost any location with good drainage. Avoid planting at the base of hills or under drainpipes where water collects and will rot the bulbs.

1. Good soil preparation is the very first step. Make sure it is loose and porous to make the planting easier (and because good drainage is necessary for all types of bulbs). Adding peat moss to the soil is a good trick to improve drainage.

The planting depth of bulbs depends on their size: a good rule of thumb is that the depth should be 3x the diameter of the bulb. However, planting depths vary by variety. For more specific planting depths, check the label on your bulb package.

The spacing of the bulbs depends largely on the effect you are trying to achieve. For best results plant in clumps of large groups rather than in single rows.

2. After loosening the soil gently press the bulbs (with pointed ends up) in the bed, cover them with the removed soil and tap it down slightly.
3. Water thoroughly.

It's as easy as "dig, drop, done."

- Additional Tips

Additional Tips for First Time Bulb Planters:

- A larger grouping of flower bulbs are far more fab than just a few planted here and there. For smaller groupings, try container plantings using pots, baskets or window boxes.
- Freezing temperatures can crack terra cotta pots and ornamental planters. By first planting bulbs in plastic pots then placing the plastic pot inside the earthen one, you'll create a natural insulation between the two.
- Lay out your bulbs on top of the soil where you want to plant them. After, poke a twig into the soil to mark where you've already planted.
- Plant markers can be pretty and practical ways to mark sections of similar bulbs. Buy wood, galvanized steel or terra cotta markers or make your own!
- For a natural look throw out handfuls of bulbs and plant them where they fall.
- Plant low-growing bulb varieties up front and taller ones at the back of your beds.
- Note the flowering times. Not all tulips, for instance, will bloom at the same time. A little planning will greatly increase the number of months you will enjoy bulb flowers.
- When your leaves drop in fall, rake a layer of them over newly-planted bulbs. They'll love the extra bedding!