

Plant Bulbs Now for Spring Color

Planting flowering bulbs is a fall tradition for many gardeners. In eastern Nebraska, bulbs can be planted from late September to October, when soil temperatures fall below 60 degrees. This will allow the root system to develop before the ground freezes. If you buy bulbs ahead of planting time, store them in a cool, dry area. A temperature of 60-65 degrees is cool enough to preserve the energy of the bulbs until they can be planted; long periods of temperatures higher than 65 degrees can damage the flower within the bulb.

Most bulbs need full sunlight, so choose a planting site that gets at least five or six hours of direct sunlight per day. Very early blooming plants like grape hyacinth or crocus can be planted under trees since they generally will bloom before the tree puts on new leaves. However, bulbs do need sun even after they bloom, since this is the time they store up energy for next year's floral display, so if you want the bulbs to bloom in successive years the area should receive at least 10 hours of direct sun per day.

Among the most popular spring flowering bulbs are tulip, narcissus (daffodil), grape hyacinth, common hyacinth and crocus, while less well known are scilla and snowdrops. There are hundreds of spring flowering bulbs to choose from that produce plants varying in flower color, flower form and height. When choosing bulbs or corms choose the largest available without mold or soft spots. Undersized bulbs may require one or two years of growth before they bloom.

Some design tips for using flowering bulbs in the landscape include:

1. Choose a variety of bulbs that bloom in early, mid and late spring to have to longest display of flowers possible.
2. Plant bulbs in masses or circular groupings and not in straight lines. Try digging a larger hole than usual and putting three bulbs in each hole. Stagger the planting holes around each other, but keep the holes only 6 to 8 inches apart. This procedure will result in large splashes of color in the landscape.
3. Double-deck your bulb beds by planting large bulbs like tulips 6 to 8 inches deep, then add a few inches of soil and plant a layer of smaller bulbs like grape hyacinth above them at 3 to 5 inches.

Most Nebraska soils have good levels of phosphorus so fertilizer is not needed at planting time, except for a little bone meal in each planting hole. Compost spaded into the entire planting area before the bulbs are planted will improve soil structure, increase organic matter and increase fertility.