

Way to Grow

Plant Bulbs Now - A Bright Idea for a Burst of Brilliant Color Come Spring

by Steve & Cathy Lambert



Nothing wakes up a garden, after the cold winter months, like the vibrant colors of flowering bulbs. Orinda has the perfect climate for a variety of spring bulbs including: tulips, daffodils, hyacinths, anemones, iris and ranunculus offering something for every garden style. To follow are some tips and tricks to help you get the most bang from your bulbs.

Planting time. Even though you see many bulbs available for purchase as early as August, it's not too late to buy your bulbs in November. To the contrary, the best planting time in our micro climate is early-late November to early December, when soil temperatures have reached 55 degrees during the day and nighttime temperatures are dropping into the 40s. Most bulbs perform best after receiving a winter chill period. If you've already purchased some bulbs, simply place them in your refrigerator (not freezer) for about six weeks. We order our bulbs to be delivered the first week of December and have the suppliers chill them for us. Still, large nurseries and garden centers continue to push the display and sales of bulbs earlier and earlier. This has resulted in a rushed, early harvest of bulbs in the Netherlands, often leaving them under developed and immature. Also, if you plant your bulbs too early, and we have a late fall heat wave, the bulbs will sprout early causing stunted or poor growth.

Choosing colors. With bulbs, the palate of color possibilities is practically endless. To avoid a carnival look, however, proper blending of colors, varieties and mixes is the key. It can be very distracting if too many colors are planted together in a single area. The worst thing to do is browse the isles of the local garden center and choose a few bulbs of many different colors because "they look good." Our preference is to use large bold grouping of single colors or well balanced blends of colors. The bulb industry has coined the term "randomnaiety." This refers to a mix of pre-chosen bulb colors which flower simultaneously in a random yet predetermined pattern. These blends are delightfully predictable yet ap-

pear spontaneously planted when in bloom.

One company that specializes in beautiful bulb blends is "Colorblends." They do a skillful job of putting both single and multiple variety bulb blends together for an eye-popping result. A few of our favorite "Colorblend" mixes for tulips include: "Stop the Car," a striking combination of apricot orange and plum purple; "Pink Margarita," a delicious pink and sweet golden yellow combo; and "Strike Me Pink," a velvety maroon and lavender pink blend. If you're looking for a Daffodil blend, try "The Gold Shoulder," a mixture of yellow and white blooms or "Pink and Lemon," pure white with apricot cups and a soft green/yellow bloom. For the best of both tulips and daffodils, we love "Aladdin's Carpet," a blend of multi colored wild tulips and dwarf daffodils, which will provide a long running magic carpet ride.

Size Matters. In the flower bulb world, bigger is better. This is because large bulbs (for the most part) produce more and larger flowers than small, scrawny ones. When purchasing your bulbs, always ask (or check package) for bulb size. Bulbs are sized, or graded, by the metric system. For example, the best tulip bulbs measure 12cm in circumference. Flowers from a lesser grade bulb of 10-11cm will look dwarfed next to the larger grade bulbs. For tulips, especially if they're to be planted in a single grouping, pick a size and stick with it. Otherwise, smaller blooms will appear undernourished next to larger ones. Simply put, larger tulip bulbs will produce superior plants with thicker, stronger stems and more impressive blooms.

For daffodils, larger bulbs will give you two to three flower stems each while smaller bulbs may produce just one. The definition "large" for daffodil bulbs is harder to qualify than for tulips. Some varieties of daffodils naturally produce smaller bulbs. Given the choice between a 16 cm daffodil bulb and a 12-14 cm bulb, you'll get a better display from the bigger bulb. Larger bulbs may seem more expensive, but they're actually a better value if



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Aladdins Carpet bulbs produce a lovely color pallet.

you consider the end number and size of blooms they'll produce. Isn't the purpose of planting bulbs to have an impressive splash of spring color anyway? Other bulbs and tubers such as hyacinth and irises follow similar rules, where larger, fuller bulbs produce better results.

Re-blooming. We're often asked whether bulbs will re-bloom in our Northern California climate and the answer is usually, "it depends." Daffodils will almost always re-bloom and spread with more blossoms year after year. This makes daffodils a great choice for naturalizing, a term applied to bulbs that not only come back for multiple years but will also multiply and spread. Most varieties of tulips, on the other hand, will give only a smattering of second blooms or maybe just some leaves after their first bloom. This is the nature of growing tulips for the industry. Why don't tulips come back? The tulip bulbs you buy and plant this fall have been groomed to bloom once. They were raised in lush, loamy soil in Holland and fertilized just right. Then, once they've bloomed in the spring, the flowers are cut off soon after they open (a necessary crime) to keep them from drawing too much energy from the bulb. The leaves are then allowed to continue growing in the cool, Dutch weather until they go fully dormant. Then they're dug and stored in a dry, climate controlled warehouse mimicking the long dry summers of the central Asian mountain where most tulips are native.

Some tulips that re-bloom here (if you're lucky) are certain strains of "Darwin hybrids" and many of the wild and species tulips that haven't had the re-blooming hybridized out of them. These include

specimens native to Iran, Greece and Turkey, which are mostly dwarf varieties that look very small next to today's big hybrids. We have a naturalized colony of tenacious, yellow flowering "Sylvestris" tulips in our backyard that have re-bloomed and spread for 11 years now. This yellow tulip has been in the U.S. since the 18th century when Tomas Jefferson planted it in his Monticello garden.

Planting Tips. For the best results, follow these six bulb basics;

1) Plant in areas which receive at least six hours of full sunshine a day, keeping in mind how the sun will be affected as surrounding trees leaf out in the spring. Daffodils and iris need plenty of sunshine to continue producing flowers for consecutive years.

2) Plant in soil that has good drainage. Avoid areas where water stands after a rain storm or irrigation. These spots will cause your bulbs to mold and rot.

3) Don't space your bulbs too far apart. It's much more esthetically pleasing to bunch your bulbs than to scatter them sparingly across an expansive space.

4) Fertilize very lightly with a low nitrogen fertilizer, preferably organic, at planting and again as shoots emerge in the early spring.

5) Dead head seed pods. If you want to encourage re-bloom, remove spent flowers as soon as they fade. Snapping off the top three inches of stem prevents seed formation and focuses energy instead on bulb growth.

6) After flowering, wait at least six weeks, until the leaves start to turn yellow, before cutting them back. This allows the bulbs to absorb the most energy. No matter what grandma says never braid or tie the foliage. This just robs the bulbs of energy and can even lead to mildew and other disease problems.

Follow these basics and you'll soon enjoy happy, yellow daffodils pushing through the soggy winter soil to give promise of warmer days ahead. Our own driveway, lined with a spring parade of white and yellow blooms, inspired one Moraga Way commuter to drop us a line saying how much they made her smile. If you have any questions about bulbs, please email office@gardenlightslandscape.com.