



STARNOTE 325  
June 2009

# FALL BULBS FOR SPRING COLOR

## *When to plant for best results*

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Traditional spring bulbs do very well in our climate. The difference here is that they are planted in late fall and early winter, not spring. Bulbs begin showing up in retail outlets and nurseries in September. They are usually gone by the end of December. This confuses new residents since other parts of the country normally have spring bulbs in February and March. You will see that planting bulbs in the desert requires a different approach.

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**When and how to Buy.** The old saying, "The early bird gets the worm," applies here. Select your bulbs from stocks as soon as they appear. The selection is better and the quality is better. Select bulbs or tubers that are plump and firm to the touch. Avoid those that are damaged, withered or soft.

**When to Plant.** Now that you have purchased your bulbs, should you plant them right away? In our climate, the answer is no. Warm temperatures sometimes extend well

into November. Planting too early will cause flower buds to emerge in the middle of winter and freeze. Best planting time will be right after Thanksgiving. [\(top\)](#)

**Storing Bulbs until Planting.** Store bulbs in a cool place, ideally at 40° to 50°, for about six weeks. Your refrigerator will do just fine. Don't store with vegetables. Some vegetables emit a gas during the ripening process which can damage bulbs. Plant the bulbs in your garden the same day you remove them from the fridge. A few bulbs and tubers, like Gladiolus and Dahlia, appear in stores in the spring. These may be planted as soon as you find them available. [\(top\)](#)

**How to Plant.** Soil preparation, planting depth, fertilizing, watering and maintaining your bulbs requires careful consideration. Let's look at them one at a time.

**Prepare the Soil** by adding organic material like *Paydirt™ Planting Mix* or *Humus Gro*. Add more to heavy clay soil and less to sandy soil. In any case, don't exceed a 50-50 mix.

**Choose the correct planting depth.** A rule of thumb is to plant at a depth equal to 3 times the bulb height. In our climate, winter temperatures are seldom cold enough to freeze the soil more than an inch or so deep. Barring other instructions, plant small bulbs like Ranunculus and Dutch Iris about 4 inches deep; Larger bulbs like tulips and hyacinths 6 inches deep. Spacing is subjective. Plant bulbs individually or scatter them on the ground and plant them where they lay for an "English Garden" look. See Gardening [Star Note #1025](#) for more information. [\(top\)](#)

**Add starter fertilizer** like *Dr. Q's® Gold Dust* to the bottom of the planting hole at the rate of 1 tablespoon for each bulb, cover with about ½ inch of soil and place the bulbs on top. Bulbs are usually planted base down, but roots and tubers may confuse you. Ask a friendly Star Nursery associate if you're not sure how the bulbs should be planted. Fill the hole with remaining soil mixture and water thoroughly. Fertilizing spring flowering bulbs during or after bloom does not provide any real benefit. Fertilize them lightly in fall with Dr Q's Rose & Flower Food to set them up for the next blooming season.

Use a flower food on summer flowering bulbs like gladiolus when the foliage first appears, then monthly until plants are in full bloom. [\(top\)](#)

**Water bulbs** thoroughly when first planted, then weekly thereafter. After foliage dies in summer, withhold water again until mid fall. Deep irrigation is important; shallow surface sprinkling is not effective. In beds where annual flowers have been planted over bulbs, the flowers will use the excess water and protect bulbs from rotting.

**Maintain your bulb area** by applying a 2 inch layer of mulch. It discourages weeds, conserves moisture and cools the soil. Remove spent flower stalks to prevent seed production and increase strength of the bulb. Don't remove bulb foliage until it is completely brown and pulls away by hand without resistance. [\(top\)](#)

**Popular Bulbs for Desert Planting.** The following spring and summer bulbs are most commonly and successfully grown in desert climates.

**Anemone.** Member of the buttercup family and closely related to Ranunculus, this dry, wrinkled tuber isn't much to look at, but produces loads of bright, cheerful, poppy-like

flowers in spring. Soak overnight before planting. If you're not sure which end is up, lay on its side in the hole. [\(top\)](#)

**Bearded Iris.** Large, stately flowers in nearly every color combination imaginable! Best varieties are available at the Iris Society sale conducted at Star Nursery in July. Store in the house in a paper bag and plant in September. Plant with the top of the rhizome or "foot" exposed.

**Daffodil.** Vigorous bulbs may show shades of yellow, white, gold, orange, pink or combinations of these colors. Dig, divide and replant every 3 years or so. [\(top\)](#)

**Dahlia.** Dwarf varieties take our hot, dry winds better than tall or "dinner plate" size. Flowers show many forms and colors including double and cactus-flowered varieties. Tubers store in the ground in our climate. Dig and divide clumps when they get congested. Leave part of the old stem with each division.

**Dutch Iris.** Small bulbs produce flowers in shades of yellow, blue, lavender, white, violet-purple or a combination of colors. They store well in the ground. Withhold water after the foliage dies. Resume again in early spring. [\(top\)](#)

**Gladiolus.** Because of their height and slender form, glads are best grown in clumps rather than rows. They provide an excellent background for other flowers and occur in every color but true blue. Variegated varieties are especially striking. Because of their 5 to 6 foot height, plant in sheltered areas or stake to prevent wind damage. Bulbs store well in the ground. Dig and divide every 2 or 3 years; re-plant in spring.

**Hyacinth.** Sweet fragrance and brilliant colors in shades of purple, pink, red and white are the hallmarks of this spectacular bulb. Excellent in containers; great bulb for forcing. Water regularly during growing and blooming period. Stores well in the ground. [\(top\)](#)

**Narcissus.** Classic bulb for the garden or indoor forcing. Newer hybrid varieties provide nice color contrasts to the traditional *Paperwhite*. Blooms early in our climate.

**Ranunculus (Persian Buttercup).** Claw-like, tuberous root explodes with vibrant colors in spring! Perfect for mild winter, dry summer climates. Plant with root tips down; withhold water after foliage dies. [\(top\)](#)

**Tulips.** Perhaps the most popular bulbs planted today. They are found in an endless variety of colors and color combinations. These bulbs need a good winter chill to produce the best flowers. Our climate is usually too mild to satisfy this requirement so it's important to store tulips in the refrigerator (not the freezer) for 6-8 weeks before planting. They are also excellent choices for indoor forcing. Dig, clean and refrigerate the bulbs each fall, or treat them as annuals and plant new ones. With hundreds of choices, it's a good way to rotate your color scheme!

[\(top\)](#)