



GARDEN GOAL: MORE SPRING BULBS

Take these five steps now to ensure a better bulb display next spring

BY PHYLLIS GRICUS

While others make resolutions at the beginning of the calendar year, spring is the time for gardeners to make a fresh new start.

Many of us make it our goal to add more pollinator-friendly, spring-blooming bulbs to our gardens, especially when we see their colorful blooms in neighboring landscapes, contrasted with bare spots in our own.

Spring bulbs can bloom as early as February all the way through mid-June, depending on your zone. They are the most welcome botanical signs of the season for us and early foraging bees. Many flowering bulbs, such as crocus and grape hyacinth, provide nectar resources in early spring.

So, we add “plan for more spring-blooming bulbs” to the gardening to-do list. But as the season progresses, we face competing priorities in the garden and, well, life. We may only remember our resolution when late summer rolls around—because autumn is the time to plant spring-blooming bulbs.

Therein lies the problem. In a garden’s late lushness, it’s hard to remember spring’s bare spots—or exactly where existing but now dormant bulbs lie. Worse yet, the bulbs you may have been drooling over in the catalogs or online are now sold out. Another spring will come, and the garden will still be without those coveted early blooms.

Does this happen to you, too? It certainly has to me. Garden professional’s true confession: While I plan gardens for clients, my own garden was mainly created with unscripted inspiration.

Being spontaneous in the garden does allow one to reap unexpected rewards, such as an accidental pairing of the buttercup-like blooms of winter aconite (*Eranthis hyemalis*) with the



Above: Spring wouldn’t be complete without bulbs — like these blue scilla and creamy *Tulipa turkestanica* — but their ephemeral nature makes it easy to forget where they’re planted, or even where one meant to plant more.

white flowers and yellow stamens of ‘Double Fantasy’ hellebore (*Helleborus niger* ‘Double Fantasy’).

But the unexpected doesn’t always translate to a reward. Like when I’m planting a new perennial in a bed in summer, and my shovel slices into dormant spring bulbs. *Aargh*—the guilt, the money wasted! What bulbs were planted there, anyway?

I suspect I’m not the only one who gets preoccupied with must-do-now garden chores. And it hasn’t worked out so well for incorporating bulbs into my established garden.

There is a quote that has caused me to spring into action: *A goal without a plan is just a wish*. Not wanting to wish away the potential for next year, I recently implemented a new approach. I planned for spring-blooming bulbs in the spring!

This strategy works exceptionally well when tucking perennial bulbs into an established landscape. Interplanting spring-blooming bulbs among perennials, grasses, shrubs and trees is a planting technique that allows you to make the most of your allotted garden space.

Here’s how you, too, can solve your bulb-planning conundrums.

1 USE PLANT LABELS

Get serious about using plant labels. They help you remember the location of plants and their names and stop you from digging into dormant plants. Labels are helpful even if you have a scaled planting plan, because they provide a quick reference out in the garden. During the growing season, discreetly tuck the labels under or behind foliage if you don’t want them on full public-garden-style display.

I prefer the durable zinc hairpin-style markers because they stay where they’ve been placed. I use a black marking pencil or sticky label to make long-lasting text.

2 TAKE A WALKABOUT

Starting in late winter, walk around your garden hunting for bare spots that could be potential planting areas for bulbs. To help you envision your future blooms, place a plant label and take a photo.

It’s a good idea to also place a plant marker near emerging bulbs and perennials to note their location. Even if you can’t initially identify the plant, the marker will remind you to do so later. Using the common plant name is okay, but adding the scientific (botanical) name, cultivar or variety and source avoids confusion. The scientific name is universally understood by gardeners everywhere.

Repeat your exploratory walk once a month until summer, when most plants have shown themselves. Adjust as necessary if previously dormant plants pop up in areas where you considered adding bulbs. Take photos to record their flower and foliage colors and create a photo file to reference. The images will be valuable when choosing a color scheme that will work with existing plantings.

When bulbs are interplanted with perennials, ornamental grasses or annuals, the latter will mask the bulb’s declining foliage. Also, consider adding bulbs under shrubs, at the base of trees and along walkways.

3 PREPARE THE SITE

Site selection and preparation are essential for successfully growing bulbs that will flower for years.

Perennial bulbs require about six hours of sunlight a day for photosynthesis to rebuild energy stores that will drive the following year’s flowers. It typically takes four to six weeks for the bulb foliage to turn yellow—a sign that recharging is complete. Do not tie, cut or braid bulb foliage. It must be fully exposed to the sun to recharge.



Jack Coyler



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Left: Tulips dot an otherwise green scene with color. **Below:** The margins of pathways are good spots to plan for spring bulbs like 'Foxtrot' tulip and grape hyacinths (left) or snowdrops (*Galanthus* 'S. Arnott', right).





Top to bottom: Winter aconite carpets the bare space beneath a weeping tree, soaking up the sunlight before the branches leaf out. Without the daffodils, this front garden would look fairly empty in early spring.

Early-blooming bulbs won't normally be affected by the shade of nearby trees, since most trees and shrubs don't fully leaf out until after those bulbs have died back. However, consider the shade factor for later-blooming varieties; those bulbs are less likely to bloom well the following year if planted in too much shade. (Not an issue if you decide to treat them as annuals.)

The ideal soil pH for growing bulbs lies between 6 and 7. Soil pH affects the availability of nutrients to the bulbs, and the bulb needs sufficient nutrition from the soil to continue to rebloom. This is why knowing the pH of your soil is relevant.

With a few exceptions, flower bulbs should never be planted in soil with poor drainage or standing water. They especially like being dry when dormant. When bulbs are planted in irrigated beds, they can rot from too much water, unless they're interplanted with perennials, shrubs and trees whose roots absorb the moisture.

You can improve conditions by amending soil with well-rotted manure, leaf mulch or humus—the result of decomposed compost. These amendments improve soil structure and enhance water drainage and retention.

Completing a professional soil test is the only way to know your soil's nutrient and pH levels. Seek advice from a local garden professional to help you interpret the test results and recommend appropriate organic amendments that address deficiencies and improve drainage.

Feed the soil, not the bulbs. After you've applied chemical-free soil amendments as the soil test results suggest, established bulbs will benefit from organic granular fertilizer on the soil surface annually after spring bloom.



This page, top: Joshua McCullough, All others: Jack Coyler.

Do not apply synthetic bulb food in the planting hole or you will risk burning the roots.

Brent and Becky's Bulbs, a long-respected source of flowering bulbs, recommends Espoma Bulb-tone, an organic product that's enhanced with beneficial microbes.

It is essential to follow the instructions provided by the bulb supplier regarding the recommended planting depth, light preferences, spacing, watering and other cultural requirements. Like any other plant in your garden, bulbs will thrive if you provide healthy soil and the right growing conditions.

Changing soil pH and enhancing drainage takes time, which is another good reason to start planning for fall-planted bulbs in the spring.

Top to bottom: Camassia (foreground) is one of the few bulbs that can tolerate wetter soil. A rainbow assortment of tulips plus summer snowflake (*Leucojum*) and blue grape hyacinths fill this entryway with color in middle spring.





4 CONSIDER DESIGN

When you interplant bulbs and perennials, the result will be a natural-style garden. But you need to select spots that will highlight the bulbs' best features, such as size, color and bloom time, and where nearby shrubs or emerging perennials' foliage or flowers will complement them.

Bulbs are most stunning when planted in clusters or groups. When grown as companion plants with perennials, a group can be defined as three, five, seven or fifty, depending on how much room you have. Avoid planting singly and in straight lines. They look best when staggered in free-form arrangements. Bulb growers will offer spacing recommendations for each variety.

Some of the earliest to flower are snowdrops (*Galanthus*), glory of the snow (*Chionodoxa*), squill (*Scilla*), winter aconite, Grecian windflower (*Anemone blanda*), crocus, hyacinths, mini daffodils (*Narcissus*) and single early tulips.

These are followed by more daffodils, tulips, summer snowflake (*Leucojum aestivum*), fritillaria and camassia. For an extended spring bulb display, include bulbs from each bloom time: early-, mid- and late-season.

Whether you prefer vibrant or muted hues, there are many ways to combine color in the garden. It's a consideration that should be part of your overall design process, along with texture and shape. Since we're discussing adding to an existing garden, I won't go into an in-depth study of color here. However, I recommend you factor in the bloom times of differently colored bulbs to avoid clashing.

Deer, rabbits, moles, voles, squirrels, chipmunks, raccoons and skunks—oh, my! The first line of defense is knowing

Top to bottom: Double daffodils fill space between emerging forestgrass and shrubs. *Fritillaria uva-vulpis* (foreground) blooms later in spring, making it a good companion for woodland phlox, Solomon's seal, coral bells and hosta, which have had time to come into their own.

Top to bottom: Hints of peach in the cups of these daffodils pick up the warm tones of a coral bell's foliage. A smattering of golden daffodils breathes life into an otherwise drab spring slope.

which critters prevalent in your garden are likely to damage your flowering bulbs and what deterrents work best. Choose resistant varieties and implement pest management.

To deter squirrels from digging up your freshly planted bulbs, tamp down the soil and cover it with leaf mulch. Avoid using bone meal, because it can attract animals that dig, like dogs, squirrels, rats and raccoons.

The only bulbs that are genuinely deer and rodent-proof belong to the amaryllis family, which includes daffodils, snowflakes and snowdrops. But there are others that deer and rabbits generally avoid, like allium and hyacinths, which contain toxic sap.

Both deer and rabbits favor tulips and lilies. If you wish to grow these, be prepared to use physical protection like plant cages and spray deterrents or try planting them among deer and rabbit-resistant bulbs.

5 PRE-ORDER IF POSSIBLE

When your bulb list is prepared, check with your preferred supplier to see when they begin taking orders for fall delivery. Sometimes discounts are given for early orders, and often you can place an order long before your planting time. The company will wait and ship the bulbs at the right date for your zone. Most importantly, you'll be sure of a good selection and avoid the misfortune of your first choices being sold out.

Enjoy bulb shopping and planning. Cheers to a beautiful garden full of colorful spring blooms! ☺

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Design: Perennial Gardens by Linda Grieve