

BULB PLANTING & CARE GUIDE

Plant hardy bulbs anytime in fall before the soil freezes, but it's best to plant them early enough to allow root systems to grow before extremely cold weather arrives. In some climates, you can plant until Thanksgiving, even Christmas. Late-planted bulbs will develop roots in spring and may bloom later than normal; they'll get back on schedule the following year. Water the bulbs after planting to stimulate the roots to grow.

Positioning bulbs at the proper depth helps ensure their longevity. Generally bulbs should be planted so the bottom rests at a depth that's two-and-a-half times the bulb's diameter. In well-drained or sandy soil, plant an inch or two deeper to increase longevity and discourage rodents. Be sure to fertilize with Bone meal; Fish Bone meal or Bulb food. Windmill recommends using organic products such as Dr. Earth.

Because bulbs look best planted in groups, you are better off using a garden spade instead of a bulb planter, which encourages you to plant bulbs singly. A spade makes it easier to set bulbs side by side in large groups. Plant groups of bulbs in holes not smaller than a dinner plate, or dig wide, curving trenches and position the bulbs in the bottom.

Layer different types of bulbs from bottom to top in the same hole to create companion plantings or a succession of bloom in a given location. For example, dig a 6-inch deep hole and place several Dutch hyacinths in the bottom, lightly cover them with soil, then plant a handful of grape hyacinths at a 5-inch depth. The two types of hyacinths bloom at the same time in spring. The grape hyacinths create a softening skirt beneath the more massive Dutch hyacinths. As another benefit, the leaves of the grape hyacinth bulbs appear in autumn and remain all winter, providing a marker for the dormant Dutch hyacinth bulbs, so you won't inadvertently plant on top of the hyacinths or dig them up.

Mixed planting provides maximum flowers in the smallest space and eliminates bare spots when bulbs go dormant. To create a succession of bloom and foliage, plant perennials around the bulb holes. As the bulb foliage dwindles, the perennials will grow up, camouflaging the bulbs' yellowing leaves. This mixed planting technique works in both formal and informal gardens.

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Remove spent flowers of large-flowered bulbs, such as tulips and daffodils, as soon as they fade. The plants' energy is then channeled in to forming large bulbs and offsets rather than in to setting seeds. Allow smaller bulbs (muscari and puschkinia, for example) to set seed, so they self-sow and form ever-larger drifts.

Whatever else you do or don't do, resist the temptation to remove bulb foliage while it is green; the green leaves nourish the bulb and next year's flower buds, which form during summer. Cut or pull off leaves only after they yellow. Also, don't braid leaves to get them out of the way. Braiding reduces the amount of sunlight reaching the leaves and hinders growth. It is safe to mow the green leaves of crocuses and snowdrops naturalized in a lawn if you wait at least six weeks after blooming.

Major bulbs need fertilizer, but at the proper times. Work in high-phosphorus plant food, such as rock phosphate or superphosphate,, in to the bottom the holes when you plant. Thereafter the bulbs need nitrogen. Fertilize with a balanced fertilizer in early spring when the shoots emerge and again after flowering to fuel foliage and bulb growth for next year's flowers. Or, apply bulb booster (a slow-release formula) to plantings in fall.

Bulb leaves may suddenly poke above ground during warm winter spells, causing gardeners to worry unnecessarily that later snow or freezing temperatures will kill the bulbs or destroy the flowers. Foliage and flower bulbs usually can withstand freezing temperatures with out harm. The flowers suffer injury only if the brittle stems are broken or if the temperature changes are too abrupt.

Hardy bulbs sometimes need to be divided. After a number of years in the garden, some daffodils and other bulbs produce offsets that cluster around the base of the parent bulb. Crowded foliage and diminished flowering are signs that the bulb clumps need to be divided. After the leaves die back, dig up the bulbs and carefully separate the offsets from the parents. Replant the bulbs immediately or store them in a cool, dry place until bulb-planting time in the fall. Plant the offsets twice as deep as their height; don't plant them as deep as mature bulbs. Small offsets will take a few years to reach blooming size.

Some corms, such as gladiolus, crocus, and freesia, produce small structures called cormels around their base. These cormels, similar to the offsets of bulbs, can be removed and replanted to increase your supply. When plants are dormant, remove the cormels. Immediately replant cormels of hardy plants like crocus and colchicum. For tender plants like gladiolus, store the corms and cormels in a cool, dry place over winter and replant in spring.

For scaly bulbs like lilies, you can dig the bulbs in spring and remove the small scales that form around the outside. Replant immediately.