



Creative ways with spring flowering bulbs

Planting flower bulbs is an easy, versatile way of having colour in your borders and containers at times of the year when there is very little else in flower. This factsheet will give you tips on how to get the most out of your spring flowering bulbs in terms of planting and aftercare and ensure that you have colour for as long a period as possible.

Using bulbs in borders

A little planning and forethought goes a long way when planting bulbs in borders and the first step is to consider flowering times of different bulbs so you don't get a glut all at once and then nothing at all. For example, you can have flowering from January to June by choosing Crocuses and/or Snowdrops which could be followed on by dwarf Irises, Chionodoxa, Scilla, early flowering tulips etc. In March Narcissi, Puschkinia and Scilla, to name but a few, will flower, as well as other tulips. Muscari joins the others in April. Alliums, Frittilarias, Hyacinths, Iris and later varieties of Narcissi and Tulips will see you through May and into June in some cases. Check the bulb packaging carefully for guidance to flowering times. Also, bear in mind the heights of the bulbs (which will be given on the packs). It is a good idea to have varying heights, using taller types at the back or middle of borders and smaller ones at the front. Try and plan things so that you have taller varieties following on from each other in different parts of the border so that there is always a new focal point to look forward to.

Another thing to consider is what is already in the border(s). You can either compliment flowers or foliage of existing plants or fill in 'gaps' where there is no interest in a border at that particular time of year. It may even be a good idea to do a plan of the border, marking heights and flowering times, colours etc. Also think about what sort of look you want to create – more traditional spring colours are blues, reds and yellows, but you can get a more unusual contemporary look by going for whites and deep purples (eg the darker shades of tulips/alliums) It pays to get it right at planting time as many of the bulbs you plant can remain in the ground without lifting, so you will reap the benefits in future years.



Planting and aftercare

Firstly, choose the right position for the bulbs. Most bulbs like a sunny spot, although some will tolerate light shade. Examples of the latter include Narcissi, Species Tulips, Snowdrops, Eranthis, Erythronium, Crocus, Colchicum, Fritillaria, Hyacinthoides, Allium moly, Cyclamen and Leucojum. Try to plant bulbs as soon as possible after purchase. If this is not practical they should be stored in a cool, dry place until they are planted and should be planted before they start to go soft and/or sprout. Before planting, ensure the soil is relatively free-draining.

This is especially important for tulips. To improve drainage work in some grit sand or grit prior to planting unless the soil is already quite light. It is also beneficial to add some bone meal to the soil before planting at a rate of about a handful to the square metre. Ensure bulbs are planted deeply enough – as a rule of thumb the depth of soil on top of the bulb should be twice the height of the bulb. In lighter soils the depth can be greater than this and in heavier soils slightly less. Cover the bulbs with soil, adding peat or sand to the soil if it is heavy, and water the area if the soil is dry. It is a good idea to mark the area with a label, as it is very disheartening to find you have stuck a garden fork through a bulb, especially if it is an expensive one!

When bulbs are in flower it is beneficial to feed them with a soluble fertiliser or bulb fertiliser to build the bulb up for the following year. Remove spent flower heads with secateurs or scissors, but leave the foliage to die back naturally if you wish to have a good display the following year. It can look a bit of a mess but, to help detract from this, plant bulbs in clumps, rather than dotted around, so at least the mess is concentrated! You can also plant strategically so there is something of interest to take the spotlight once one group of bulbs has gone past its best. Most spring flowering bulbs may be left in the ground. Tulips are less hardy, however, and should ideally be lifted, although they may also be planted a bit deeper (around 9”) if you don’t wish to lift them.

Bulbs in containers

Bulbs can look very effective in containers, either planted in layers to give a prolonged period of interest from bulbs alone or planted under winter bedding such as pansies or Primulas. This is a great way of injecting a bit of extra life into your containers to herald the spring. Ideal options include Chionodoxa, Crocus, Eranthis, Erythronium, smaller Fritillaria, Galanthus, Hyacinths, Iris reticulata, Muscari and smaller varieties of Narcissi or Tulips. Choose bulbs that are the right size for the containers and opt for fragrant varieties on patios and near doors and seating areas so you can appreciate their scent.

For further information on a wide range of bulbs, planting and uses the new Bulb Expert by Dr Hessayon is an excellent reference book.