

Combining Geophytes and Perennials

By Bobbi Gustafson

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Plant geophytes and perennials in layers for vibrant, colorful results.

Some of the most beautiful plant combinations are those achieved with geophytes and perennials. What's a geophyte, you ask? That's the general term given to the underground parts of tulips, lilies, crocus, anemones, daffodils, iris, dahlias, and similar plants. Many people collectively refer to these underground parts as "bulbs," but that is not always correct. Tulips, lilies, daffodils and narcissus grow from bulbs, to be sure, but crocuses and anemones grow from corms, irises grow from rhizomes, and dahlias grow from tubers. And that's just for starters.



Purple aubretia blooms next to pots of daffodil and tulips, surrounded by muscari, primroses, and white daffodils, with corn flowers waiting in the wings. Master Gardener Bobbi Gustafson often plants pots of bulbs and puts them in her holding beds in fall. As the pots bloom, she can place them where they look best. This approach also allows her to change a look quickly and replace plants as their blooms fade. Photo by Bobbi Gustafson.

But a geophyte by any name is still a sweet companion for many perennials. So, if you want to create stunning displays of color and texture, start with a little research. Beginning in early spring, study for one year the different perennials and geophytes that bloom at the same time. With this knowledge you can mix and match, imagining which plants would complement others, and come up with your own combinations.

If that's too much planning for you, here are some commonly used pairings that deliver great looks year after year.

Early each spring, crocus will appear. Try white or purple crocuses arranged in front of or around helleborus. In pots or in a flower bed, combine crocus, primroses and snowdrops. Crocus even look great in lawns, because usually they come and go before the grass needs mowing. To plant crocus corms, make a dibble out of a piece of 1-inch doweling. Taper one end and press it into the lawn to make planting holes. Plant crocus corms 3 inches deep, cover them with soil, and rake compost over the site, which will become a showpiece in late winter. Or, try 'Pickwick' (a purple-and-white-striped crocus) arranged in a thick mass around white snowdrops—or vice versa.

After crocuses, I think of muscari. Some fun combinations are muscari, Grecian wind flowers, primrose, 'Tete a Tete' mini daffodils, early tulips and hyacinth planted in pots. These pots make lovely gifts.

To make a pot combo, begin during the last week in September or in October. Take an 8x8 pot and put a couple of inches of soil in the bottom. Mix in a few sprinkles of bulb food at the bottom and cover with a little more soil. Add tulip bulbs and cover with a couple inches of soil. Plant mini daffodils, and add a little more soil so the rest of the bulbs should be about 4 inches deep. "Garnish" with compost on top. Set the pot in a place open to rain and cold. When the plants start peeking out of the soil, sprinkle a little pet-safe slug bait around the area and get ready for a rush of flowers and color.



This concrete pot holds a 'Blue Cloak' fir, with 'Gold Dust' allysum and bluebells planted around it. Photo by Bobbi Gustafson.



Combine different textures for an eye-catching look. Case in point: this Lilium regale and sea holly. Photo by Jane Billingham.

Other fun combinations include early pink tulips coming up through white Grecian wind flowers, green and white late-spring tulips planted under allysum, and purple allium planted under a healthy patch of allysum or under a nice patch of Sky Blue Chinese Forget-Me-Nots. White allysum and blue Dutch iris are beautiful, too, as are dark purple tulips under a patch of Creeping Jenny. Early white emperor tulips growing up through multi-colored Grecian wind flowers are a sure hit, and Sweet Woodruff is a nice backdrop for tulips and pansies. Some geophytes also come up nicely through sedum. And, big pots of daffodils can be started early, then relocated to strategic sites when inspiration strikes.

Try this, too: In October, dig a hole 14 inches in diameter and 12 inches deep. Mix a little bulb food in the bottom of the hole. Cover with a half-inch of soil. Plant 22 red Appeldoorn tulip bulbs. Cover bulbs till the hole is 5 inches deep. Then dig the hole 6 inches wider and plant dark blue winter pansies over

the whole circle. After they take root well, sprinkle some compost around. In the spring the red tulips will grow up through the dark blue pansies, making a marvelous display. When they are done, cut the tops off the spent flowers (the pansies will still be blooming) and sprinkle the spot with compost. Add white Grecian wind flowers to the outside of this combination for a patriotic effect.

Want more ideas?

Try a patch of early, yellow tulips with a thickly planted, electric blue muscari in front of them for a striking look (see photo). Or, plant a thick row of bluebells and a large clump of ‘Gold Dust’ allysum in front, and poppies sown behind them both. The poppies will grow up and steal the show when the others are done blooming.



Yellow tulips can be layered with muscari (a.k.a., grape hyacinth) for a dynamic and colorful effect. Photo by Bobbi Gustafson

Geophyte planting season is only a few months away. Try a few of these combinations or ones of your own making. Your friends will be amazed—and you will be hooked.

Right depth, right result

To ensure your geophytes bloom and thrive, plant them at the proper depths. Here’s a short list of common flower bulbs, corms, rhizomes and tubers, and their recommended planting depths.

Name	Planting depth (inches)
Anenome	3
Crocus	4
Snowdrop	4
Bulbous Iris	4
Dahlias	4 (plant in spring)
Tulips	6
Muscari	6
Hyacinth	6
Daffodil/Narcissus	7
Lilies	8
Tulips	12 (discourages multiplying)



Hot pink Allium sphaerocephalum and yellow Achillea anchor this layered bed.

Photo by Jane Billingham.