

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener  
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Everyone knows how to plant a tulip bulb - pointing end up right? Here in the Pacific Northwest, October is the ideal time to plant spring-blooming bulbs. Included in that category are tulips, daffodils, hyacinths, crocus and alliums. The basics for planting are simple.

Dig a flat-bottomed hole 12 to 18 inches wide. Space the bulbs 3 or 4 times their diameter apart and 2 or 3 times their length deep; 8 inches deep for large bulbs and 3 to 5 inches deep for smaller bulbs. Be sure to place them narrow end up in soil that is well drained. Bulbs will rot if they are standing in heavy wet soil. Mix in compost before planting but do not fertilize. It is not necessary for the first year's bloom.

Fertilize after the first year's bloom begins to fade. Do not cut back the green foliage as next years bloom is insured by the nutrients sent to the bulb by its leaves. Foliage can only be removed when it begins to fade and turns brown.

To create a natural look, plant bulbs in clusters and plant short bulbs in front of bulbs with taller blossoms. For a double-decker effect, especially for bulbs that bloom at the same time such as tulips and grape hyacinths, you simply cover the large bulbs with a layer of soil and plant the smaller bulbs on that layer directly above and finish filling the hole. In large masses this effect is quite striking. Some folks like to see bulbs blooming in the lawn or a grassy meadow. Crocus, grape hyacinths, and scilla or the miniature daffodils do well in such a setting. Mix the bulbs and then plant at random by piercing the turf and tucking bulbs into the pockets. Mowing must be delayed until the bulbs have bloomed.

There is such a wide range of flower colors available that it is sometimes difficult to decide what combinations look good. If color blending in the garden is important to you try using a color wheel to design your spring bulb garden. Plant in a monochromatic arrangement, one hue in varying shades such as dark blue, medium blue and pale blue. Alternatively, try a complimentary color scheme using opposites on the color wheel like violet and yellow. An analogous arrangement uses colors next to one another on the color wheel, red, red-violet and violet for instance. The results will be very pleasing.

Spring blooming bulbs are tougher than you think. They will tolerate freezing weather even after they have begun to grow. They are more likely to suffer from warm, dry late winters and springs. Be sure to give them a little water at those times to improve their spring show. If you have trouble with critters digging up your bulbs try planting daffodils, hyacinths and crown imperial. Most animals don't like them.

You might try laying chicken wire over the bulbs after you fill in an inch of dirt. Turn the edges down and then finish filling the planting hole. This prevents squirrels from getting at the bulbs. Deer are probably the worst destroyers of tulips. Very little discourages a determined deer. Some repellants will work for short periods but the best protection from deer is a high fence and a vigilant dog.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.

