

# Early Spring Bulbs

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## A succession of color

With the last of the snow melting and the weather beginning to warm up, it's hard to resist going out into the garden to hunt for signs of life. Few things can give such a thrill as seeing the first yellow crocus open wide on a bright early spring day, or a group of tiny daffodils popping up. If you didn't plant bulbs last fall to make this happen, then this is the time to plan ahead for next year. If you wait until next fall to decide, you might not remember where you wanted to plant!

Bulbs are an important part of the spring garden, providing color and interest (and food for early pollinators) when it's most appreciated, then fading into dormancy to let the summer garden do its thing. While all of us, especially here in the Skagit Valley, are familiar with tulips and daffodils, there are many, many more bulbs that shine in early spring.

The first bulbs to bloom here in Western Washington are typically snowdrops (*Galanthus spp.*), often emerging in January but coming into their full bloom in late February. Planted in clumps or in a massive drift, snowdrops are a sure sign that spring is on the horizon. Snowdrops are always white with green or yellow markings, but there are double flowered varieties that are very charming.

Winter aconite (*Eranthis hyemalis*), a tuberous member of the buttercup family, provides a vivid spot of yellow surrounded by a frill of greenery, blooming around the same time as snowdrops. As a bonus, it's resistant to deer and rabbits.

Miniature *Iris*, also called rock garden *Iris* or bulbous *Iris*, begin blooming in February. Unlike bearded *Iris*, which grow from rhizomes, these come from small bulbs and are easy to slip into the garden wherever you have a bit of space between plants, especially those that go dormant in the winter. The flowers are only a few inches across and sit on short stems that are unfortunately wildly popular with slugs, so you may need to get into the garden with slug bait earlier than usual to protect them. The most commonly available species, *Iris reticulata*, comes in white, blue and purple. You can also find bright yellow *I. danfordiae* or look for the fancy veining of *I. histroides* ('Katharine Hodgkin' is a particular favorite).

*Crocus* pop up on the heels of snowdrops. Grassy foliage comes up from the corm in February or March, followed quickly by delicate flowers in brilliant colors including white, yellow, lavender, and deep purple. They open only on sunny days, protecting their fragile petals from rain. The earliest varieties, commonly called snow *Crocus*, include smaller-flowered species like *Crocus*

*crysanthus* and *C. tommasinianus* that come in a lovely range of colors and patterns. The larger cultivars (sometimes called Dutch *Crocus*) like *C. vernus* 'Pickwick' and 'Jeanne d'Arc' appear a few weeks later. *Crocus* are deer resistant, although not slug resistant. They can be planted in swathes in lawns if you're able to hold off on mowing until the foliage has ripened. Otherwise they fit nicely anywhere in the garden where they will get some sun.



*Crocus tommasinianus* comes in a lovely range of colors and patterns. Photo by Jessamyn Tuttle / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.

*Muscari armeniacum*, also known as grape hyacinth, is a wonderful addition to the spring garden thanks to its pure blue color (They also come in white, purple, and pink). *Muscari* spreads with enthusiasm by both seed and bulb offset, so be aware of the commitment you are making when planting it. Blooming in March and April, it makes a perfect companion for daffodils. A slightly earlier option for blue flowers is *Chionodoxa*, or glory of the snow. These deceptively fragile little blossoms pop out of seemingly nowhere, and look their best when planted en masse. Species include *Chionodoxa luciliae* and *C. forbesii*, among others, and come in pink and white.

While the most commonly seen type of *Narcissus* is the large yellow trumpet daffodil like 'King Alfred' or 'Dutch Master', there are also many varieties of early blooming miniatures. 'Tete a Tete' is a tiny yellow trumpet *Narcissus* that is often available in pots early in the season. It does just as well planted in the garden, often coming up through a layer of snow. 'February Gold' is a slightly taller yellow miniature, while 'Jack Snipe' is a handsome dwarf *Narcissus* featuring a yellow trumpet surrounded by white, swept-back petals. For a real punch, the distinctive 'Jetfire' offers bright yellow and red-orange blooms. One of the very earliest daffodils, however, is

'Rijnveld's Early Sensation' that produces a full-size trumpet daffodil flower a full month before other daffodils, an impressive show which sometimes gets cut abruptly short by a late winter snowfall or windstorm.

As with most bulbs, plant in late fall or early winter, setting them at a depth 2-3 times the size of the bulb. Because most of these varieties are much smaller than the typical big garden hybrids, it is easier to tuck them in throughout a garden bed or put a bunch in a hole together to make a pretty cluster of color in the spring. Bulbs should be well watered in at the time of planting and while actively growing and flowering but do best when allowed to stay mostly dry through their summer dormancy. And if you want your bulbs to come back next year, don't cut the foliage down until it has ripened, since the leaves are what provide the bulb with food for the next season.

If you plant every bulb listed here, you should have a succession of color starting in January until the big show starts in April. Enjoy!



Snowdrops in the Discovery Garden. *Photo by Jessamyn Tuttle / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

### **RESOURCES:**

- <https://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/>
- [Growing Flowers from Bulbs.](http://pubs.cahnrs.wsu.edu/publications/pubs/em2869e/) Dr Elwood Kalin
- "Early Spring Bulbs." Chicago Botanic Garden  
[https://www.chicagobotanic.org/plantinfo/smart\\_gardener/early\\_spring\\_bulbs](https://www.chicagobotanic.org/plantinfo/smart_gardener/early_spring_bulbs)
- [The Plant Lover's Guide to Snowdrops.](#) Naomi Slade
- [Irises: a Gardener's Encyclopedia.](#) Claire Austin