

Bulbs 101

They're everywhere! You see them in the grocery store, the drugstore, the home improvement warehouse, the nursery, catalogs, and even the hardware store. We're talking about bulbs of course, and not the kind you screw into the light socket. Shouldn't you be buying some of these treasures and popping them into your garden?

A flower bulb is an amazing organism. In some cases, it looks as if there can be no life inside. But indeed, the bulb contains the leaves, bud, food, and roots for the plant it will become. Be aware that the term bulb is sometimes used loosely. Crocuses are technically corms, but the differences are very slight and generally not something one needs to worry about.

Spring-flowering bulbs that are planted in the fall include daffodils, tulips, hyacinths, crocuses, and alliums. Then there are summer-flowering bulbs that are more tender and planted in the spring. This latter set includes gladiolas and dahlias. Some bulbs, like lilies, can be planted at either time. Right now is the time to concentrate on those spring-flowering bulbs.

The first rule of bulb care is to acquire them early when the selection is best. Select bulbs that are firm and show no signs of decay. Once you get them home, store in a cool, dry place (between 50–60°F). They can also be stored in a refrigerator that does not contain fruit – the gas emitted by ripening fruit can destroy a bulb.

The second rule is to get them in the ground at the proper time. Plant bulbs too early and they will start to emerge prematurely and thus risk freezing in the winter. Plant them too late and they will not have time to fully develop. The best time to plant bulbs in the northwest is September or October. Just be sure to get them in the ground before the first frost.

Those are really the two most important rules for bulbs. Planting them is simple. Follow the directions for the depth they should be planted. In general, larger bulbs like daffodils and tulips should be planted 6–8" deep. Smaller bulbs such as crocuses, grape hyacinths, and the small alliums should be planted just a few inches deep. You can either dig individual holes for each bulb or dig out an entire bed and plant a mass. For a natural look, toss a handful of bulbs on the ground and plant them where they land. In general, the end result is much more attractive when planted in an irregular pattern rather than straight rows.

But what side goes up? When you look at a bulb carefully, you will see one end is slightly pointed and the other end has some dried hairy-looking things sticking out (these are roots). Put the pointy side up – however, to let you in on a little secret, most of them will still come up even when placed upside-down.

A little bone meal or bulb food added to the bed never hurts. Cover the bulbs firmly with soil, water generously, and then wait for your beautiful spring show. Another good idea is to mark the bulb bed either now when planting or in the spring. If you decide to add to the bed next fall, after all signs of the bulbs are gone, you will avoid digging up or severing the established bulbs.

It's easy, fun, and very rewarding. You can't go wrong with bulbs!

References

"*What is a Bulb?*" and "*Flowers and the Facts of Life*", www.bulb.com/basics.asp.

Hill, Lewis and Nancy. *Bulbs*. Vermont: Garden Way Publishing, 1994.