



If you can still dig a hole, you can plant a bulb.
CAROL BARANY PHOTO

Did You Forget to Plant Your Spring Bulbs?

Then check to see if they are firm. If so, and the ground isn't frozen, there's still time.

by Carol Barany for Yakima Valley Master Gardeners

I made my list and checked it twice. I decked my halls and had gifts ready and wrapped two weeks before Christmas. I frequently paid myself glowing compliments for how smoothly I navigated one of the busiest times of the year.

But it's the day after Christmas, and I have a confession to make. In a corner of my laundry room, half-hidden under piles of ribbons, wrappings, and ornament storage boxes, are bags of tulip and daffodil bulbs that never got planted last fall.

In a perfect world, spring flowering bulbs should have been planted weeks ago, since they require a period of chilling before they produce flowers. During this time, roots are established and will supply the tops with water and nutrients from the soil.

But surely I can't be the only Yakima Valley gardener who procrastinated. Look around and find your own bags of bulbs and test them for firmness. If the bulbs feel firm and look healthy, then it ain't over yet.

Waiting to plant the bulbs in the spring is the least viable option. Few gardeners have the proper storage conditions to keep the bulbs cool and dry, and most bulbs begin to soften and rot or actually sprout in their bags before they get planted. Let's just say I have loads of personal experience with this option, and the results have never been good.

We still have two other options. Sure, there's some snow on the ground, but the soil at my house is unfrozen and still workable. Healthy bulbs planted now have a good chance of blooming come spring, but possibly later than normal. But they must be planted NOW to make it work.

Or, you can force bulbs

If you're not up for digging when the temperature outside is near freezing; daffodils, tulips, hyacinths, crocus, and Dutch iris can be potted and stored for their required chilling period. Once that's accomplished, they are brought indoors where they will be 'forced' to bloom. Wouldn't it be a mood changer in late winter to have flowers?

If this sounds doable, you'll need clean pots with good drainage holes filled with potting soil. Do not bury the bulbs, but allow their 'noses' to be exposed. No worries about fertilizer. The bulbs have enough stored food to flower one time.

Plant the bulbs shoulder-to-shoulder. Usually 6 tulip bulbs, 3 hyacinths, 6 daffodils, or 15 crocus will fill a 6-inch pot. Allow some space at the top of the pot so it can be watered easily. Water the bulbs immediately, and anytime the soil seems overly dry.

Bulbs must be given a cold temperature treatment of 35– 48 degrees F for a minimum of 12–13 weeks. This cold treatment can be provided in a cold frame, an unheated basement, or garage. Keep the bulbs in the dark, or they may start growing before they're fully chilled.

Chilling and Blooming Times

- **Daffodils:** 12-15 weeks of chilling; 2-3 weeks to bloom after chilling
- **Tulips:** 10-16 weeks of chilling; 2-3 weeks to bloom after chilling
- **Hyacinth:** 12-15 weeks of chilling; 2-3 weeks to bloom after chilling

Mark your calendar to remind yourself when the first pots can be removed from storage for forcing to begin. The required chilling period is a range. Start checking the pots at the short end of the range. When the shoots are 2-3" high, move the pots into a cool, sunny location in the house where temperatures are 50-60 degrees. Avoid direct sunlight. Once the bulbs are blooming, move the pots to a cool location each night to prolong the life of the flowers.

Hyacinths, crocus, and daffodils can also be forced in water in special clear glass vases. The bulb is placed in the upper portion, water in the bottom. The vase is then kept in a cool, dark room (preferably under 50 degrees F) for four to eight weeks until the root system has developed and the top elongates. At this point it should be placed in a bright window, where the bulbs soon will blossom, and that blooms may be smaller than if they were planted directly in the garden last fall.

After blooming, most gardeners compost forced bulbs. If you can't bring yourself to do that, keep watering the pots and add some fertilizer. When the foliage yellows, you can remove the bulbs and plant them in the garden. It may take several years for the bulbs to build up the reserves to bloom again, but at least you saved them.

