

Fall Bulb Planting by Carol Barany



For everything, there is a season, and that's especially true in the garden.

It's impossible to deny that our gardens are slowing down in September and October's shorter and cooler days, but it's not over yet. Fall bulb planting season is just getting started.

Daffodils, crocuses, tulips, hyacinth, and alliums are just some of the beauties arriving in Yakima this month after a long trip from Holland. Wooing every gardener with the promise of spring splendor, they have evolved to be tough, yet irresistible.

One of nature's wonders, flower bulbs are neatly bundled packages programmed with everything they need to grow and bloom on their own. Slice a bulb from pole to pole

and take a look inside. You'll see storage tissue that provides food, roots all ready to grow, and even baby blooms with tiny anthers and developing leaf buds, all neatly packaged in a papery skin.

Every gardener needs some. Bulbs can be planted in containers, window boxes, borders, and under trees. Some can be forced to bloom indoors in the depths of winter.

I'm always tempted to just start buying, but it hasn't always gone well for me.

For fall bulbs to develop optimally and produce the best possible flowers next spring, the process of growing roots must begin during the colder months. And when the soil warms again in early spring, foliage develops, supported by the root system that has already been established. Strong, healthy roots and foliage produce the blossoms we prize.

If bulbs are planted too early in warm soil, foliage could be spurred into growing too soon, competing for a supply of the bulb's energy reserved for root development. Ultimately, the flowers will not reach their potential.

Wait until the soil cools to 50-60 degrees and then get your bulbs planted quickly. In Yakima's Zone 6, this usually means mid-October through early November. Keep

unplanted bulbs at 60 degrees if you can. Transfer them from plastic bags to brown paper bags for better air circulation to prevent molding while you wait.

On the flip side, if you plant your bulbs too late, like in January or February, the bulbs will not have enough time to produce a strong root system for the spring show. At a time when the bulb should be producing foliage and blooms, a root system is added to their 'to-do' list. Roots, foliage, and blooms will all be weak.

Planting too early has ever been a problem for me. More than once, I've found myself pouring hot water over frozen winter soil, attempting to thaw it just enough to dig planting holes for the bulbs I just discovered in a bag in a dusty corner of my laundry room.

I also confess to waiting until spring to plant. Hardy fall-planted bulbs require 10-13 weeks of soil temperatures below 45 degrees to root and begin shoot and flower production. My overdue efforts were a total waste of time and money, producing nothing but scraggly foliage and a few meager blooms

This year, I want to try something different.

Before I buy a single bulb, I will plan ahead for the perfect spot for every single one. And I will plant them as soon as the soil cools to 50 degrees.

I also vow that this year, all those early bloomers will be planted where I can see them from my kitchen or dining room windows, along the driveway, or near the street where they can be enjoyed by passersby.

Has this ever happened to you? You're in love with the idea of a lavish display of hundreds of tulips, so you buy that many. After several hours of toil on planting day, you realize that you have room for only half of the bulbs you bought. Not wanting to waste them, you plant the excess in random locations, often places not easily seen from the house. I remember the year I planted surplus crocuses in a distant corner of our property where they bloomed unseen by anyone but my neighbor's chickens.

For the most dramatic color effect, I'll plant in groups of at least 10-25 bulbs of the same variety. Twenty five bulbs planted close together will have more 'pop' and presence than 200 planted 3' apart.

Summer isn't over yet, and the garden is still putting on a glorious display, but I can feel it. Winter is on its way. Get some spring flowering bulbs in the ground before the soil freezes. Come March, as soon as you see their bright green tips emerging from barren soil, you'll be glad you did.