



THINKING ABOUT BULBS

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Bulbs are one of the most rewarding of garden plants. For very little maintenance, they show off their splendour year after year to announce the arrival of a more powerful sun. Have as many bulbs as you have room for is my motto. Snowdrops to late tulips, all provide a show in the garden and chase away winter's dreariness. Actually you can have room for quite an array of bulbs by planting them beneath perennials and shrubs which will hide the bulb foliage while it is dying down.

Here are a few plants suitable for growing with daffodils: phlox, painted daisies, day lilies, baptisia, tall yarrows, Siberian iris (not the bearded variety) hostas, and the taller upright varieties of sedums. Foliage from these plants will hide the bulb foliage as it dies.

The secret to being able to plant more bulbs each year in September is to know what you have growing already and where. This spring, take pictures and then take more pictures so that come summer you don't put your shovel into an existing clump and you will take the guess work out of fall planting. Bulbs should be planted no closer than a hand span away from the roots of perennials.

Pictures are also helpful when it comes to dividing those oversize clumps of bulbs. The first sign of overcrowding is a decrease in flower size and numbers and uneven bloom and plant height. The best time to divide and replant bulbs is when they are dormant and the foliage has turned yellow or brown. Choose the site for the new bulbs and prepare the area so that there is a good supply of fertilizer (10-10-10 and bone meal or phosphorus) in the soil below the bulbs to feed the roots. You are now ready to divide or move your bulbs and plant in the new site.

It is possible to have too much enthusiasm for growing bulbs. Amed III a Turkish Sultan encouraged the cult of Tulipomania in the 1600's by having picnics in his garden in April when the tulips bloomed. He entertained his guests by having the tulips illuminated with candles backed by mirrors and then attached lights to his tortoises that moved carefully amongst his prize bulbs.

If you were enticed into buying bulbs in February from the supermarkets, these can be recycled and planted out into the garden. After the spent blooms are removed, the pots should be kept moist and the green foliage should last for about 6 weeks to allow the leaves and stems to photosynthesize and feed the bulb. Daffodils and crocus are the best candidates for this treatment in our climate. Of course they will not bloom in 2008 but you have a pretty good chance of getting some bloom in 2009. Many of the tiny daffodils for sale in the grocery stores were the early blooming Tete-a-Tete variety which is a very hardy dwarf cultivar that naturalizes well. They belong at the front of a bed or in a rock garden as their normal height is about 10 inches.

If you are growing tulips and daffodils take note that these bulbs need deadheading as soon as the flower fades or they will set seed heads which will rob the existing bulb of nutrients. The stem and leaves need to die back naturally to maximize future bloom potential.. Once the flowers fade, dry fertilizer such as bone meal or super phosphate can be applied but it must be watered into the soil Fertilizer is necessary when bulbs are grown under trees or in groundcover such as vinca or spurge where they have to compete for nutrients or where there are large naturalized plantings. .

The first bulbs to show up are the snowdrops (Galanthus). They can come up in the snow, withstand sleet and hail and naturalize so that your clump will be larger each year. These bulbs are deer, squirrel and chipmunk proof. If you are not growing these yet, check around and try to see some this year and pick a spot for growing them next year.

If squirrels are bothering your tulips, try onions. I am trying onions in my bird feeders and squirrels definitely do not like them. Ornamental onions (called alliums) are bulbs that bloom later than tulips but should do a good job of discouraging those mischievous bulb wreckers and provide charming flowers as well. . If you have a good supply of chives, you could try planting these among your tulips.

For more information about bulbs, try www.bulb.com and enjoy the bulb parade.

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