

Planting Flower Bulbs in the Fall

Fall is officially upon us and during this time of year, planting spring-blooming bulbs is a ritual for many. Bulbs such as tulips, hyacinth and crocus are available from many retailers including box stores and garden centers. Varieties carried at box stores can be limited but can sometimes be purchased in great quantities relatively inexpensively. Local garden centers often carry a wider assortment that is often imported from premium growers known for their quality. Garden centers also often carry newer varieties that may be more unique than those carried by box stores.

When purchasing bulbs, it is important to visually inspect them for overall health and signs of disease. They can be planted anytime between now and November. Most often, specific planting instructions are included at the point of purchase. If instructions aren't included, note that larger tulip, daffodil and allium bulbs should be planted about 6 inches deep. Smaller bulbs should be planted between 2 and 4 inches deep.

According to a Dutch government Web site, during the 1630s, tulip bulbs sold for as much as the cost of a house and were a sign of great wealth. As tulips became more available, the cost of bulbs was reduced and they became a popular landscape plant in temperate areas all over the world. Depending on the variety, bloom time can vary from early to late spring, and size varies anywhere from 6 inches to 2 feet tall. Most hybrid tulips (by far the most common type) are usually treated as annuals or short-lived perennials and often need to be replanted. True species tulips, not as spectacular in show as the hybrids, will last for several years and often naturalize in the area they are planted.

Daffodils, or narcissus, are another popular family of bulbs. They are often last for many years and will naturalize under certain conditions. Colors vary from yellow to white and sizes are comparable to tulips.

Several other types of bulbs are commonly available. Among them are hyacinths, crocus, grape hyacinths and windflower. These bulbs, although not as popular, can enhance the yard and add additional color and texture to the landscape in the spring. They also will often naturalize and last for many years. Care must be taken with some, such as grape hyacinths. Under the right conditions, they can spread and become noxious and weedy. Another bulb known as star-of-Bethlehem, although beautiful, should never be planted in the landscape. In its own way, it can be more of a nuisance than field bindweed (morning glory) and crabgrass. When I was a teenager, I mowed a neighbor's yard infested with this bulb and had to deal with it continually plugging the lawn mower. It had spread from one flower bed to over a half acre of land in less than twenty years. The only way it was effectively controlled was by the city building a road over the yard.