



Bulbs for the Perennial Garden

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It may seem a little early to be speaking of bulbs, but two garden centres in Lakefield, Griffin's and Horlings are having their bulbs arrive in two weeks time.

The function of all bulbs is to store food through a dormant period like the winter so that the plant can get going again when conditions are right.

First of all a little background on what bulbs are:

A true bulb such as a daffodil or tulip is made of modified leaves that are attached to a flat plate. They surround the following seasons flower bud, and are themselves surrounded by a papery "tunic". Other's like lilies are covered by fleshy scales.

Corms look much like bulbs but if you cut them open, they are solid and starchy. Crocus grow from corms.

Tubers are modified stems. Both roots and shoots sprout from the same growth buds called eyes. The potato is a typical tuber. Tuberous roots are similar but are actually swollen roots not stems. Dahlias produce tuberous roots.

Rhizomes are thickened underground stems, growing in a horizontal manner sprouting new sections as they spread. The bearded iris is a rhizome.

When buying any kind of bulb, choose healthy bulbs. Look for plump bulbs without any soft spots or dark diseased blotches.

Check the basal plate where the roots will emerge. It should be firm and undamaged.

Daffodil bulbs with two "noses" will provide twice the bloom. Tulips should have only one nose. Two

noses and they will not bloom.

Obtain your bulbs early for a good selection of healthy and viable bulbs that have not been left in the stores to become dried out.

Plant tulips 8 to 10 inches deep to prolong the life and protect them from rodents. When you set them deep, tulips are slower to split and stop flowering. It also makes it more difficult for the pests to dig them up.

Always plant the same variety of daffodil together in groups of 10, 20 or more. All the flowers will bloom at the same time in the same colour. This will make an impact, for just a few bulbs stuck here and there look lonely and a clump of mixed colours looks chaotic.

Divide or fertilize crowded daffodils to increase their bloom. They form large clumps and may have depleted the soil's nutrients. Hence lots of foliage but no flowers. If you decide to fertilize do this in the fall for good root growth and continued effectiveness in the early spring. Use an all-purpose balanced fertilizer when growth starts in the spring. I like 20-20-20.

Remove the bulbils or secondary bulbs that form on the stems of some lilies and plant them to make new plants. The bulbils look like dark berries but contain no seeds at all. They are similar to miniature bulbs and have the ability to sprout into new plants, just give them a chance and watch them grow.

Cut lily stems to the ground in the fall, to avoid stem rot.

Mark the location of bulbs with a stake, stick, rock or tag so that you know where they are while they're dormant. Without an above ground reminder, it is easy to dig into the bulb by mistake when planting other flowers or hoeing out weeds. I know because I have destroyed several Fritillaries by putting my fork through them!

Leave bulb foliage loose to ripen properly. Cutting off the foliage before it yellows severs the bulbs' food supply and weakens them. My daffodil and tulip leaves are still green and seem to be growing - such a strange year. Cut the tall-spent stems of tulip flowers down to the first leaf. Removing the old flower and leaving the attractive broad foliage in the garden just as Mother Nature intended.

Store those tender bulbs that you bring inside for the winter, in vermiculite or peat moss to keep them from drying out. These materials are a packing cushion and more for they help to keep the bulbs from drying out or rotting. Peat moss, which naturally suppresses disease, is particularly good for this job.

Dig the bulbs when the soil is relatively dry so that they do not emerge caked with mud.

Gently brush off any extra soil removing any old vegetation and throw out any damaged bulbs.

Prepare a place for winter storage by placing a layer of vermiculite or peat in the bottom of a box, Store one kind of bulb in each box. Be sure to label them so you will know which is which next spring.

Set the bulbs in the box making sure that they do not touch each other – cover with a thick layer of the medium you are using. Store in a cool but not cold place during the winter that is be sure that they do not freeze.

Check your bulbs in storage regularly. Remove any that show signs of rot. Should they appear to be shriveling, spray with water. Next spring /fall depending on the species, plant them in the garden and start all over again

I am frequently asked why bulbs sometimes fail to bloom. Here are some of the possible causes:

- If the bulbs have been stored in temperatures that were too dry or too warm, they won't bloom.
- Bulbs may have been planted at the wrong depth. Check and re-plant if possible.
- Bulbs may have been planted too late in the fall. Fertilize them and they will do better the second year.
- The bulbs may not be getting all the spring sunshine that they need.
- The soil may be too heavy or too sandy.
- If your newly planted bulbs fail to bloom well the first spring after planting, it may be because the bulbs were of poor quality or diseased when you bought them, or any of the following.
- Rodents sometimes eat crocus, hyacinths, tulips, muscari and other bulbs. Deer and rabbits may eat the tops in the spring time.
- This year it is possible that a lot of your next years spring bulbs may have rotted with all this rain.

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