

# Garden Wise: Caring for Your Spring Bulbs

- Tom Schwartz For the Times-News



Master gardener Mary Jo Mallan's daffodils Monday out front of her home in Twin Falls.

DREW NASH, TIMES-NEWS

*I wandered lonely as a cloud  
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,  
When all at once I saw a crowd,  
A host, of golden daffodils;  
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,  
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.*

*William Wordsworth*

For several weeks now we have been greeted by these beautiful yellow daffodils throughout the valley. Those daffodils are not alone. They are joined by clusters of tulips, hyacinths, crocuses, lilies and other spring flowers.

When you look at one of these spring flowers, you see a flower and leaves. The flower is beautiful, awe-inspiring, as those daffodils were to Wordsworth. The leaves, however, do not tend to inspire. Some home owners consider those leaves an eye-sore and cut the plants down to the ground after the flowers die. Their reasoning is that the plant has served its purpose for this year. They would like to get rid of the unsightly leaves and wait for next year's spring flower to emerge. However, cutting down the leaves while those leaves are still green is a mistake.

You need to understand what is unique about bulbs. Some plants store the food they need for growth. What we refer to as a bulb is the chamber where that food is stored. Bulb producing plants are ideal for the home garden because their stored food reserve makes them durable, forgiving, and easy to handle. In most cases spring bulbs are perennials. They will come back year after year with little maintenance required.

Their annual growth cycle does not end when the flower dies down. It is at that point that the plant begins the process of manufacturing food and storing it for the next year. The way plants manufacture food is called photosynthesis. With the help of the chlorophyll in their leaves, plants convert carbon dioxide and water into carbohydrates. Photosynthesis, by the way, is the basis of all life on earth. Animals can't create carbohydrates so we get ours by eating plants and plant eating animals.

Your spring flowering daffodils, tulips and other bulb plants transport the energy they have created in their leaves down to the bulb. The bulb stores this energy for the next spring when it will begin the cycle of growth all over again. If you cut down the leaves right after the flowers have died, you prevent the plant from producing the energy it needs for next year's growth.

What should you do? It is helpful to cut off the flower head after the flower dies. This is what we call deadheading. It helps the plant and makes the bed more attractive. However, while the leaves are green, don't cut them down. Let them do their work. When those leaves turn yellow (usually by mid-summer), they are no longer making food for the next year. That is the time to cut them down. Rather than discarding the cut leaves in the trash, I recommend cutting those leaves in smaller pieces and leaving them as part of the organic mulch for your flower bed. Those decaying leaves will help nourish the soil and improve soil structure.

To draw attention away from the bare foliage of early spring bulbs after their flowers have died, consider planting other bulbs with them that bloom later and will help draw attention away from the yellowing leaves. You might also consider companion plants that bloom at different times and provide

visual interest throughout the growing season. Try to choose plants that have basically similar needs for water and sunlight.

Many gardeners intersperse colorful annuals with their bulb garden. For example, if you walk the grounds around the LDS temple on Eastland, you will see majestic mixed tulips reigning over beds of pansies and violets.

Whatever you do, remember that a major part of your goal is to keep your bulbs healthy for next year by letting them create the food they will need for next year's display of color.

Tom Schwartz is a member of the Twin Falls Master Gardeners.