

PLANTING DAFFODIL BULBS

October, 1997

By now, you've probably either received daffodil bulbs you ordered, or purchased bulbs from your local plant store and you're getting ready to plant them. Daffodils can be planted any time until the ground freezes, but it's important to get them planted so that they can make good root growth before freezing weather arrives. If it's still hot where you live, you may want to wait until the ground cools a bit before planting.

Daffodils are among the easiest bulbs to grow. You simply dig a hole, put the bulb in, cover it, and go on to the next bulb. While that basic approach would work, the better you prepare your planting location, the better the bulbs will perform. Keep in mind that daffodils can remain in one place for years, so good soil preparation pays off in the long run.

Select a site that gets at least a half day of sun in the spring during the plant's above-ground growth. You can plant in the shade of deciduous trees, but avoid the dense shade of evergreens or the north wall of the house. Most will do better in full sun, although red cups and some pink cups will appreciate some afternoon shade to prevent the cups from burning.

Daffodils are not particular about soil type, but they do require an area that is well-drained. They like lots of water while they are growing (and they are growing from the time you plant them and root growth begins, until the foliage turns yellow next spring), but not standing water.

What kind of display do you hope to achieve with your planting? Do you want a "host of golden daffodils" growing in your meadow, or naturalized in an old orchard? Or do you want to plant daffodils in your perennial garden for early spring bloom? If you're planning on a naturalized look, I hope you haven't bought a mixture of cultivars. A drift of fifty of one kind here, and a drift of another kind there will look much better. Toss the bulbs by handfuls onto the ground, and plant them where they fall. Some may be closer together, but this will give you a natural look. If you're planning to plant among your perennials, tuck in a group of three or five here and there. You can even plant just one bulb of a special cultivar. It will soon grow into a fine clump in your garden. If you buy just one of a number of different cultivars, as many collectors do, don't plant them in a straight line like a row of soldiers on parade. Tuck them in between your other plants. Daffodils are informal plants, and don't look well confined in geometric patterns.

To plant bulbs in the sod, use a broad spade and make a cut along three sides, and turn the sod up. Dig the hole about eight inches deep, and work up the soil in the bottom, adding peat, sand, or other humus as needed. Add about a tablespoon of low nitrogen fertilizer (5-10-10, or similar) and mix well. Never add fresh manure, as it promotes bulb rot. Bonemeal is not beneficial. Add a handful of sand and place the bulbs on the sand. Cover the bulbs with soil, and replace the sod. If planted properly, bulbs in the sod can live and bloom for many years with a minimum of care. If you're planting lots of bulbs in sod, you may wish to investigate the feasibility of investing in, or renting, the bulb drills which have been advertised recently. The sod makes a fine winter mulch for the bulbs. Remember, though, that you cannot cut the grass where the daffodils have been planted for at least six weeks after they have bloomed. The foliage is required to make the bloom for the following year.

If you're preparing a new garden area, dig the soil deeply and mix in humus as required—peat, fine pine bark, compost, ground leaves, etc. Some gardeners add gypsum to heavy clay soils to help break down the soil. Add some low-nitrogen fertilizer and mix well. Be sure the fertilizer doesn't touch the bulbs. Bulbs should be planted between four to six inches deep, and about six inches apart. Shallow planting encourages bulb division which will require more frequent lifting. Daffodils need digging and dividing when the blooms become smaller, or you have noticeably fewer blooms. They can usually be left in place for five to seven years without being divided.

If you have miniature daffodil bulbs, plant them about three inches deep. Some growers use plastic berry baskets when planting miniature bulbs. Put the berry basket in the ground and place the bulbs in the basket. This makes it easier to find the small bulbs when you lift them several years later.

Add a label, or make a map of your planting. Who knows, you may want to order more of the same cultivar another year, or you may decide to enter a flower show. In any case, it's nice to know the names of the plants that bloom in your garden.

After all bulbs have been planted, cover the area with mulch and water thoroughly. During the winter, you can put the ashes from your fireplace on the ground where you've planted daffodils. They love the potash. In subsequent years, broadcast the low-nitrogen fertilizer over the daffodil areas each fall. The bulbs will repay you with years of bloom.