

Time to Plant those Bulbs!

October, 2000

When the trees begin taking on colors of red and gold, and the leaves float lazily to the ground, it's time to think of planting spring-blooming bulbs. Whether you bought your bulbs at the local retail store or ordered bulbs by mail from specialist growers, you will want to get them planted sometime before the ground freezes.

Daffodil bulbs are tolerant of both acid and alkaline soils, and will grow in clay or loam. However, to get the best blooms from your bulbs, you should prepare the soil to give the best growing conditions you can provide. I've just returned from the fall meeting of the Midwest Region of the American Daffodil Society. An afternoon panel discussion was held with various speakers telling of their soil preparation methods. One gentleman said that he "gardens on a grid." This enables him to keep track of his plants more easily. The squares of bulbs can be interspersed with other perennials. He digs deeply, taking the soil from the first furrow and putting it at the other end of the bed being prepared. The following rows are turned over, and when he gets to the end of the bed, the soil from that first furrow fills in. He amends his soil with a low nitrogen fertilizer, humus, and perlite. This is thoroughly mixed, and then he puts a layer of perlite under the bulbs to be planted. Some growers put sand under the bulb, but perlite has the advantage of being light-weight. As he plants the bulbs, he also "plants" a small label with the name of the bulb. This way the name of the bulbs can be determined upon digging, even if the labels have been lost.

A young man, who grows mostly daffodils, maintains that deep digging in soil preparation is essential. He spoke of a friend in California who had planted bulbs in a half-barrel, and when the bulbs were dug the following year, they had made roots almost three feet long that had gone down and completely circled the bottom of the barrel. So my friend often digs two feet deep into the soil, so that his daffodils' roots have room to grow. He, too, amends the soil with humus. When he digs out the clay which is common in this area, he puts it on top of the ground in a corner of his garden, and after several years the action of the weather breaks down the clay, and it can then be used again in the garden.

Another speaker told of someone who had the typical rocks and subsoil common to a new house. Her answer was to dig out those rocks and subsoil, haul it away, and have topsoil brought in. The common thread, which all speakers emphasized, was that humus was very, very important, and that the humus needed replenishing every three years or thereabouts. And the bottom line is that while daffodils are easy plants that are not demanding in their requirements, the better you prepare the soil, the better your flowers will be.

I dug a lot of my bulbs this summer, and now am in the process of re-planting. After the bulbs were dug, I added fine pine bark, gypsum, and some other clay soil conditioner, and hired a college boy to rototill the area for me. Now, as I

plant, I inspect each bulb again, making sure it is healthy. I did this when I dug and cleaned the bulbs, but it's important to check again. I've found many more bulbs that are soft, and upon cutting them open, I've found the fat larva of the narcissus bulb fly. So, these bulbs are discarded. And while I don't like finding evidence of fly, at least I'm cutting down on the population for next year!

As I plant, I'll mix some low-nitrogen fertilizer into the soil under the bulbs. The bulbs will be planted between four and six inches deep. Shallow planting will encourage bulb division, while deeper planting means I won't have to dig and divide so soon. I'll spread some granular Dursban over the top of the soil hoping to cut down on re-infestation of narcissus fly, and then the entire area will be mulched with fine pine bark.

I'm also going to do a little experiment this year. We've always been told to avoid manure in planting daffodils. But on my visit to Spain this spring to see daffodils in their native habitat, it seemed that the best flower was always in the middle of a "cow pie." So, I bought some cow manure, and I'm going to plant some bulbs with the manure under the bulbs—the manure covered with soil so the bulbs don't touch it, some bulbs with manure on top of the soil, just under the mulch, and some bulbs without manure to see if I can tell a difference. I'll keep you posted on the results!