

Fall-planted bulbs bring sensational springtime scenes | DIGGIN IN



Clusters of daffodils planted along a walkway make the area look larger and showier. (Christian Curless/colorblends.com)

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Late October and November are bulb-planting months — the time to tuck daffodils, tulips, hyacinths and other spring-flowering bulbs into the soil where they can root and surprise you with sensational springtime scenes.

Whether you are a beginning gardener or a master gardener, bulbs add a layer of interest that makes any yard extraordinary. Think of trees and shrubs as the bones that structure your yard. Perennials, including bulbs, dress it up, giving you year-round color when you plan and plant with seasonality in mind. For instance, there are early, mid- and late-flowering daffodils, so avoid picking varieties that bloom at the same time. A free print or downloadable digital catalog from **Brent and Becky's Bulbs** in Gloucester provides bulb descriptions that tell you when each variety blooms and how to combine bulbs for dramatic results.

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Replay

"The great thing about bulbs is that you plant them and then wait for them to put on a show," says Denise Hutchins, spokeswoman at Brent and Becky's Bulbs.

"However, we do get many calls in the winter when there are warm days and the leaves begin to push through the ground. Once the bulbs have grown their roots, they will not freeze due to a chemical that forms within the bulb that protects them. But when the leaves seem to come up too early, they may get nipped by a frost. This will only cause the tip ends of the foliage to turn yellow, but will not hurt the flower or the bulb. Fluctuations in the temperature throughout spring may delay or excel the bloom time and can cause flowers to bloom on shorter than normal stems.

"But, for the most part, Mother Nature cares for the bulbs throughout the winter."

Bulbs also are good for small garden spaces and containers because they give you a pop of color and interest without taking up a lot of room. Again, fall is the time to prepare those containers of bulbs and over winter them outdoors, letting Mother Nature provide the care with minimal assistance from you, adds Hutchins. To protect pots of bulbs outdoors from cold, freezing winds, place them in a sheltered, but sunny spot and/or pile leaves around the pots.

For kids, bulbs are one of the simplest and best ways to get into gardening indoors or outdoors.

"A wonderful project through the winter is to pot them up and enjoy during the cold winter months," says Hutchins.

"Or out in the garden when they can go out and look and see the changes every day and then experience the joy of seeing their flowers bloom. With great success rates from growing bulbs, kids can develop a love for gardening and the natural environment."

Best new bulbs

Hutchins lists these best new bulbs at Brent & Becky's Bulbs.

Narcissus Prosecco. The first all-pink daffodil is a fragrant jonquilla with multiple blooms per stem. Very unique in the daffodil world, Hutchins says.

Narcissus Starlight Sensation. Bred in Gloucester by Brent and Becky Heath, it's a fragrant, creamy white daffodil with dark green foliage and multiple blooms per stem.

Tulipa Brownie. The double, early tulip is sweetly fragrant and features a blend of warm tones. "When Jay and Brent saw a patch of this blooming in the field in Holland, they were impressed that you could smell the fragrance while standing near the field," she says.

Allium Miami. The long-lasting, oval-shaped ornamental onion is a beautiful flower for late spring/early summer and a pollinator attractor. Alliums can dry in the garden and be spray painted too, for a pop of color all year.

Musari armeniacum Alida. It's an early blooming flower with rich purple coloration that is easy to force bloom indoors. Great choice for outdoor containers placed where you can see and enjoy them.

Color combos

For viewing at close quarters, simplicity is pleasing, according to Tim Schipper, founder of colorblends.com.

"Think in twos and threes," he says.

"Pair any daffodil — white, yellow, apricot or bi-color — with blue grape hyacinths, blue squill or blue Glory of the Snow. For spectacular tulip combinations, consider blends designed to bloom together. ...

"In even the smallest yard or garden, there's always room to plant a handful or two of flower bulbs. With crocuses, daffodils, hyacinths and tulips, that's all it takes to make an impact in spring."

Planting tips

It is best to plant spring blooming bulbs after the first killing frost, which is usually mid-November in Hampton Roads.

"Due to the fact that some places bring their bulbs in late summer/early fall, many people believe that is the proper time to plant," says Hutchins.

"However, the cool soil temperatures that comes about after that first heavy frost promotes the root growth on the bulbs. If you plant in an area that does not have optimal drainage before the bulbs have a chance to grow roots, there is a greater chance that they will rot in the ground before having a chance to perform."

"Avoid any soggy areas where puddles collect after rain," adds Schipper.

Bulbs also are heavy feeders. They will perform fine the first year, but will need to be fed in following years, adds Hutchins.

"We prefer to top dress with compost in the fall to give the plants the nutrients they need to flourish," she says.

Schipper advises: If you're planting bulbs likely to naturalize and you want to leave them in place after bloom, then it's a good idea to fertilize at planting time with a low nitrogen organic fertilizer.

Daffodils, in particular, prefer full sun. If you notice throughout the years that they are not blooming as well as before, there are two things to look for. First, make sure the trees in the area around the daffodils have not grown up so much that they may be shading out the planting space. Full sun — six hours a day — is important to the daffodils not only when they are blooming, but while the foliage is still green. At this time they are still photosynthesizing to make food for next year's growing season. The second reason you may get foliage and not many flowers from an existing stand of daffodils, is that they do require nutrients.

"Feeding the soil with compost makes happy flowers," she says.

After-bloom care

Once spring-flowering bulbs have finished their show, it's important to allow the bulb foliage to die back on its own to allow for maximum photosynthesis by the plant.

"Some people do not like the look of the yellowing foliage, however, by cutting it to early or even braiding the foliage, it can be harmful to the plant and will be evident by a reduced amount of flowers the following year," says Hutchins.

"It is best to wait until three-fourths of the leaf has yellowed before cutting it to the ground or, if possible, allow it to die all the way back. To make this more aesthetically pleasing, plant the area with plants whose foliage will begin to emerge as the bulb foliage is dying back. A great example of this is planting daffodils and daylilies together."

Contact Kathy at kvanmullekom@aol.com or follow her at Facebook/KathyHoganVanMullekom.

Bulbs and more

Here are some upcoming events at Brent and Becky's Bulbs (www.brentandbeckysbulbs.com) in Gloucester:

Living Flower Arrangement Workshop at 1 p.m. Oct. 15. Build your own living flower arrangements to bloom in spring; great gifts to give for upcoming holidays. Everything provided, overwintering instructions as well so you can fully enjoy the brightly colored flowers and decorative leaves that emerge to fill in your layered bulb container masterpiece. \$35 per person. Register in advance at 804-693-3966.

Jack O'Rotten Pumpkin Recycling Program Oct. 29-Nov. 12. Take your rotten, saggy jack o'lanterns to use in Brent & Becky's Bulbs compost pile and get paperwhite bulbs in. The garden center also accepts leaves in clear

trash bags throughout fall. The Bulb Shoppe is open 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Monday-Saturday; call 804-693-3966, Ext.108 for more information.

Forcing Bulbs for Holiday Blooms at 10:30 a.m. Nov. 12. Pot up forcing bulbs to have them in bloom for the holidays. Bring your own container or purchase one, and create a centerpiece for entertaining. Free class, just purchase materials on site. Register in advance at 804-693-3966.

Wreath Workshop 11 a.m.-noon Dec. 3. Decorate your home for the holiday season with a wreath you make. Hands-on instruction and an assortment of greens will be provided, but bring you own if you want. \$45 per person. Register in advance at 804-693-3966.

Daffodil connoisseur

In Hampton, Melanie Paul has been growing daffodils seriously since 2000. The 30 differently named collection of cultivators she had in 2003 has now grown to 250 types, according to Paul, a member of the Virginia and American daffodil societies. She has won 210 blue, 145 red and 37 yellow ribbons in shows, as well as 22 silver cups and special ribbons for historic and intermediate daffodils. In 2004, she won the coveted gold ribbon for a best standard bloom in the Mid-Atlantic competition.

"By selecting the right cultivators for blooming time you can have daffodils blooming in your garden from February, (Rijnvelds Early Sensation) until late spring with the Poeticus," she says.

"Daffodils are classified as very early, early, early-mid, mid-season, mid-late season and late blooming.

"I love daffodils is because they return year after year. I planted about 25 Ice Follies daffodils bulbs on the side of our house 15 years ago and they have multiplied to over 200 blooms."

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