Marianne Binetti: It’s fall — and time to think about spring

BY MARIANNE BINETTI

The first week of October is time to dig into spring. Plant bulbs now for spring blooms later.

The classic spring flowering bulb is the tulip, but in Western Washington the bulb that does the best in our cool and often rainy spring weather is the daffodil.
Planting 100 bulbs at least once in your life should be on every gardener’s bucket list. The anticipation of a color-packed display will make the long winter worth the wait.

Here are things you may not know about planting bulbs this month:

**Planting bulbs is quick and easy — if you know the tricks.**

You can plant 100 bulbs in 30 minutes. This is according to a demo from colorblends.com, a company that sells bulk bulbs in coordinated color combos. The reality is that the number of rocks and boulder in your soil will determine how long it takes you to plant bulbs.

1. Excavate an area 5 feet square and dig down 5-to-6-inches deep. Place the soil that you shovel on a sheet of plywood, cardboard or a tarp. If you are also digging up rocks and boulders, load these into a bucket or wheelbarrow as you dig. (15 minutes)

2. Place bulbs in hole, pointy edge up but as close as 4 inches apart. (5 minutes to place 100 bulbs)

3. Slide soil from plywood or tarp back over the newly planted bulbs. (10 minutes to cover bulbs)

That’s it — a half hour of your time and you will now have a show stopper of spring blooms at least once in your life.

**Tulips may not come back year after year but daffodils often will.**

Tulips need hot, dry soil during the summer months when they are dormant and so in our climate tulip bulbs are more likely to rot or be eaten by voles or mice. Moles do not eat bulbs, they are meat eaters, after earthworms and grubs.

Daffodils are poisonous to rodents (and humans) and daffodils adjust better to our summer rains so are more likely to return for a second year of blooms.

In both cases, the shorter the bulb when it blooms, the more likely it is to return the following spring. Think of Snow White and her loyal little dwarfs. Short or dwarf tulips and dwarf daffodils are more closely related to the wild or species bulbs. Read the description when you buy bulbs and pick out the varieties that will top out at less than 12 inches.

**The best time to plant bulbs in Western Washington is October and November.**

You can cheat and plant as late as December and if you find a forgotten bag of bulbs in your garage or garden shed during the month of January, plant them anyway. You have nothing to lose as bulbs are living things and cannot be stored unplanted for an entire year.
If you can’t dig, (compacted soil, bad back) your bulbs may still bloom if you place them on top of the soil and cover with 5 to 6 inches of the bark, light gravel, sand or compost mixed with gravel, bark or sand. Just be sure the location has good drainage.

The flower is already formed inside the bulb and so bulbs are “ready to go” packages that do not need fertile soil or extra plant food unless you want them to bloom for more than one spring. The bulbs do need a chilling period before they will flower so get them into the ground now so they can experience winter weather.

**Bulbs do great in containers.**

It is easy to poke a few bulbs into the potting soil left from summer annuals. They will be safe from burrowing rodents and if the potting soil drains quickly and the container has a drainage hole you should see signs of spring growth emerging from your porch and patio pots as early as St. Patrick’s Day.

Consider bulb planting your celebration both the fall and spring season and you’ll earn great future returns on just a few minutes of autumn energy investment.

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