

Planting bulbs is super easy and brings bouquets of spring flowers



Daffodils will reliably bloom year after year in the Sacramento area. **Hector Amezcua** Sacramento Bee file



BY DEBBIE ARRINGTON

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Dig, drop, done.

That's the mantra for planting bulbs, says master gardener Ellie Cary. And now is the time to start chanting.

"Few plants are so easy (to grow) that give you so much joy," says Cary, who's become the go-to bulb expert for Sacramento County master gardeners. "Just dig, drop, done; it's that simple. Plus they give you a gift – they multiply."

October is time to start getting bulbs in the ground for waves of spring flowers.

"In Sacramento, we can plant bulbs all the way to Jan. 1," she says. "The later you plant, the later they'll flower (in spring). I like to plant some every two weeks from now until the end of the year."

That staggered planting also lengthens the time those bulbs will be blooming in February, March and April.

“Now is the perfect time to buy bulbs,” Cary notes. “You’ll find great selection (in nurseries). But do a little research before shopping and planting. It’s easy to get overwhelmed.”

Cary suggests starting with the Sunset Western Garden Book for guidelines to bulb basics. Most bulbs do well in the Sacramento area with a little extra care.

When bulb shopping, look for firm, plump ones, Cary says. “They should look and feel like an onion.”

“You may want to wait a little while until you plant them – the weather has been too warm,” she explains. “I don’t like to put mine in the ground until the soil temperature is below 55 degrees.”

Until then, she stores her bulbs in the refrigerator. That keeps them firm and fresh until planting. But avoid storing any apples or pears in the fridge at the same time. The fruits release ethylene gas that can rot the bulbs.

Some bulbs – most notably tulips and hyacinths – demand pre-chilling six to eight weeks before planting. Usually set at 35 degrees, refrigerators offer just the right near-freezing experience to make those fancy Dutch imports feel like they’re still in Holland.

“If your tulips have short stems, that’s because they didn’t get enough chill,” Cary notes. “The best tulips for our area are species tulips that are native to Afghanistan. They don’t need as much cold.”

When planting time comes, use the bulb’s height as a guide, she says. “Dig a hole three times the bulb’s height.”

For example, plant a 2-inch-tall daffodil bulb 6 inches deep. Multiple bulbs can be planted in the same hole – if it’s wide enough.

“Spacing is not that big a deal; they can be crowded together,” Cary says. “I like my bulbs to make an impact. So I make a 12-inch-wide hole and plant 12 bulbs in it.”

Cover with garden soil; fertilizer is optional. (Cary recommends fertilizers specifically designed for bulbs.) A big plus for California gardens, most bulbs are drought-tolerant and bloom with little irrigation.

“If we have a normal winter, don’t water them at all,” Cary says. “The rain will take care of them. If there’s no rain in February, you may want to give them a drink, but not until they start sprouting.”

After planting, just be patient. The rewards will come in spring.

“A bulb is a miracle,” Cary says. “It has everything it needs to be beautiful. All you need to do is plant it.”

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