



Using Bulbs in the Landscape

Flowering bulbs are an important part of landscapes and gardens. The variety of bloom color, flowering time, plant height and shape make bulbs a good addition to any landscape or garden.

Planning Process

Before buying or planting bulbs, spend some time planning. Sketch the plan on graph paper. This advance planning will assure that you buy the proper number of bulbs. Since the foliage of spring-blooming bulbs dies by early summer, this plan will provide a record of where the bulbs are planted in case annuals or perennials are interplanted later.

Uses in Landscape

Foundation Planting — To add early spring color to a foundation planting, plant a grouping of 12 or more bulbs. Evergreen shrubs in the foundation planting will provide a nice background for the bulbs. Also, pay attention to the foliage color of annuals and perennials. The foliage of some of these plants makes a nice backdrop for groupings of bulbs.



Tulips add color to this corner planting.

Deciduous Shrubs and Trees — Spring bulbs can be planted under deciduous shrubs or small trees in the landscape. Do not plant spring bulbs under evergreen shrubs or they will not have enough light to grow and bloom. The early blooming bulbs receive plenty of light because they start growing long before deciduous trees and shrubs start to develop leaves. Some bulbs that perform well under trees and shrubs include crocus, grape hyacinths, winter aconites, snowdrops, Siberian squill, leucojums, bluebells, and early-maturing daffodils.



Daffodils add early spring color to this wooded subdivision entrance.

By carefully selecting spring bulbs to match blooming dates of shrubs, they can provide a beautiful color contrast with early-flowering shrubs such as forsythia or flowering quince. They can be used in combination with smaller flowering trees like crabapple, Bradford pear, or redbud.

Border Planting — A border of low-growing bulbs such as grape hyacinths, hyacinths, or small daffodils planted around the edge of a vegetable garden or flower bed adds interest to these areas. A border of bulbs planted along the edge of the lawn will add a splash of color to the lawn area.

Perennial Beds and Rock Gardens — Spring bulbs can be designed into a perennial bed or border to add areas of spring color. The bulbs will bloom during March, April, and May before perennials start to flower. Locate the bulbs in the planting bed so the dying foliage will not be noticed.

The spring bulbs used in the perennial border can be left in the ground all year or they can be removed and replaced by other plants after flowering is complete. When planning borders, take into consideration the heights and spacing needed by different plants.

Ground Cover — Some bulbs can be planted with low-growing ground covers like ajuga, violets, vinca minor, or English ivy. The height relationship between the ground cover and bulb flower must be considered.

The ground cover should be no more than half the height of the bulb flower. The ground cover helps support the bulb stems and protects the flowers from mud splashed by rain or a sprinkler.

Lawn Area — The corner of the lawn is also a common location for a landscape planting. This planting usually consists of small shrubs and perennials. One or two groupings of spring bulbs of one color will provide a point of focus to the planting during the spring months.

Steep Slopes — Steep slopes in the landscape are difficult to mow and maintain. Daylilies, which have a fibrous root system, are an effective plant to use on these sloping areas. The foliage is attractive, and the bloom adds color to the area. By using daylilies, you can eliminate the problem of trying to mow that area of the landscape.

Containers — Both spring and summer bulbs can be planted in portable containers. After spring bulbs have finished blooming, the container can be moved to a location out of sight while the foliage matures. If summer bulbs are used, they will add color all summer long to areas such as a patio or a deck. Since containers are portable, they can be moved around and used in different areas of the landscape. When relocating a container in the landscape, pay attention to the light requirements of the bulbs and be sure the container has drainage holes.



Tuberous rooted begonias planted in a container provide summer color in shade areas.

Flowering Sequence of Bulbs

As you develop a plan to add color to the landscape using bulbs, remember that these bulbs bloom at different times. Weather may have an effect on when bulbs start blooming in the spring, but it will not affect the order or sequence in which they will bloom.

Mail order catalogs may show pictures of many bulbs in bloom at the same time. But in nature, this does not happen. Some spring bulbs have overlapping bloom periods, but they still maintain their blooming sequence. There are enough different spring bulbs available to provide bloom from early February to mid-June. Summer bulbs will bloom from early summer to fall. There are only a few fall-blooming bulbs available.

Design Considerations

Mass Planting — Keep in mind that planting bulbs of one variety or color en masse will have greater visual impact. A mass planting provides uniform color and texture that is pleasing to the eye. Plus, bulbs will be easier to care for since they will have the same cultural requirements, and the foliage will mature at the same time.

Never plant bulbs in a single straight row or in a single circle around a tree or bush, except in very formal gardens. Bulbs look better when they are planted en masse. Plants don't grow in a single straight line in nature. They tend to grow in irregular masses.

Grouping Bulbs — With the major spring-flowering bulbs such as tulips and daffodils, plant at least 12 bulbs of one variety in a grouping. The more bulbs planted of one variety and color, the greater the impact.

The smaller spring bulbs should be planted in groups of 50 or more to have impact. The bloom of a small number of smaller bulbs is insignificant. Smaller bulbs need to be viewed close-up so they should be planted along sidewalks, patios, or entry ways to the home.

Most summer-flowering bulbs have larger blooms, so fewer bulbs are needed to make an impact. Three to six bulbs are suggested as a minimum number of summer bulbs of the same variety to plant in a grouping.

Bulb Heights — Consider the natural height of the bulbs before planting. In general, taller-growing bulbs should be planted to the rear of the planting area. Shorter-growing bulbs should be planted to the front. An exception to this rule would be the situation where a shorter bulb emerges and blooms early before the plant located in front grows large enough to screen it. Once the bloom period is past, the front plant will screen the maturing foliage of the shorter plant. Tall-growing tubers like the tall dahlias should be used in the corner of the garden or yard where they are viewed from a distance. The dwarf types can be used as facer plants.

Planting Small Spaces — Plant bulbs of one color in small spaces in the landscape. One color will have greater impact and make the planting space look larger. Mixed colors planted in a small space will make the space look even smaller.

Planting Large Spaces — In areas of the landscape where there are large spaces, a planting of two or three colors can be effective. Concentrate the bulbs for each color together and do not inter-mix them. Select colors that blend together. White flowers can be effective in helping blend colors together, and they can brighten dark corners.

Interplanting — The color of spring-flowering bulbs is enhanced when interplanted with pansies or other compatible early flowers. Summer annuals such as petunias or marigolds can be added later. Summer annuals do a poor job of hiding the dying bulb foliage, but they will extend the color of the planting bed through the summer. In small planting areas, it is more effective to interplant with one color of an annual or a perennial like ajuga, forget-me-nots, or small hostas.

The color of summer-flowering bulbs will be enhanced when interplanted with summer-flowering annuals such as petunias, marigolds, and other annuals.

Many of the summer bulbs are tall, and the lower part of the plant is unattractive after bloom. Plants like lilies and dahlias can be interplanted with perennials, annuals, or shrubs to hide the lower stem area. Daylilies are a good choice to hide the lower stems of the lily. The dwarf forms of daylilies like Stella de Oro do an excellent job of facing a bed.

Color Considerations — Colors give us a feeling or perception of either warmth or coolness. Cool colors are shades of blue, violet, and green. Warm colors are shades of red, yellow, and orange. To the eye, warm colors are perceived as advancing while the cool colors seem to recede. Cool-colored flowers will recede even more if they are placed in the shade.

The perception created by warm or cool colors can be used to plan your flower plantings in the landscape. When planted at a distance, warm-colored flowers will appear closer while cool-colored flowers will appear farther away. A planting of cool-colored flowers at the rear of the yard will make the yard seem larger. Warm-colored flowers planted in the rear of the yard will make the yard seem smaller. Plant cool-colored flowers closest to the point from which they will be viewed. Cool colors are best viewed close up, such as near a patio or next to a sidewalk. Warm-colored flowers are effective in bringing a distant part of the yard into focus. Warm colors will create a dramatic display in any yard or garden and will draw attention in the landscape.

Naturalizing — Naturalizing is the process of imitating nature with bulb plantings. In nature, bulbs do not grow in rows. The flowers appear in irregular clumps scattered over the landscape. There are several early spring bulbs that naturalize easily in grassy areas. Some of these include snowdrops, winter aconites, crocus, squill, and daffodils. Keep in mind that the foliage cannot be

mowed off until it dies down naturally or the bulbs will eventually die out. Daffodils are a good naturalizing plant. But since the foliage does not mature until the end of June, people tend to mow off the foliage. In the home landscape, daffodils should be located in an out-of-the-way location where lack of mowing can be tolerated.

