

The Green Thumb

Lawn and Garden News You Can Use

September 2009

Fall is the Time to Plant Spring Bulbs

Martha Smith, horticulture educator

September doesn't seem like the time to be thinking about your spring garden, but when it comes to hardy spring-blooming bulbs, fall is the right time. We purchase and plant tulips, daffodils, crocus, and many other bulbs as the days get shorter and our night temperatures start to dip into the 50s. For Illinois, this is usually about mid-October.

When you purchase a spring-blooming bulb in the fall, it is basically dormant. There are internal activities going on, but the bulb seems to not be growing. When we plant the bulb, it begins to grow, developing roots and elongating its flower stalk. This stage is important to prepare the bulb for its spring debut. The bulb senses colder temperatures and stops growing. For spring-blooming bulbs to flower correctly, they need a cold resting period called vernalization. For spring bulbs in Illinois, this is called winter. Each different variety has its own internal time clock regarding how long it needs to be in this cold resting state. Very early blooming bulbs have a shorter time period than late spring-blooming bulbs. When bulbs are forced for indoor display, they are treated with gradually colder temperatures until they are consistently held between 33 and 45 degrees F. for a pre-determined time, mimicking winter conditions.

The South can't successfully grow many of the spring-blooming bulbs we enjoy because their soil temperatures are too warm. Southern gardeners can purchase pre-cooled bulbs every year. The South may have Azaleas and Camellias, but we enjoy the beauty of spring-blooming bulbs.

When selecting bulbs, pay attention to flowering times and where you will be planting them in your garden. Combine early-, mid-, and late-blooming bulbs for a fantastic display from early March through late May. Select a site that does not hold water or stay wet at any time during the year. Bulbs are modified underground storage organs. What they store is primarily food needed to support the above-ground plant until it can produce its own through photosynthesis. Once the above-ground portion starts to die down, food is being sent back to the bulb to reform for next year. Think of an onion in your pantry... that is a type of bulb. If it gets too wet, it will rot. If your bulbs are in a low-lying area where snow melt drains, your bulbs will rot. Do these bulbs need full sun or partial shade? Place according to sun requirements.

Plant bulbs two to three times as deep as the bulb is tall. For most tulips and daffodils, plant them 6 to 8 inches deep, measuring from the bottom of the bulb to the soil surface. Phosphorous is needed to encourage root development and moves very little in the soil. Mix the recommended amount of phosphorous in the soil below where you will place the bulb. Read and follow product quantity instructions. Dig your planting hole or area, spread phosphorous, and stir into the soil. Place bulbs and follow with 5 tablespoons of 10-10-10 soluble fertilizer mixed into the soil that will be placed over the bulb.

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Continued on Page 3

Plant Your Own Garlic

Tony Bratsch, horticulture educator



Garlic is a garden specialty that can be successfully grown in Illinois. It does, however, take some advance planning. Planting is best done in the coming fall months, for a harvest next summer.

Like flower bulbs, garlic and its close relative elephant garlic are perennial bulbs. When planted in the fall, garlic will root, make top growth the following spring, and eventually die down by early summer.

Although garlic can be spring-planted, a chilling requirement must be met for the cloves to properly grow. To meet this requirement, spring-planted garlic should be stored in the refrigerator for at least eight weeks before planting.

Fall-planted garlic will obtain its chilling in the soil and has the advantage of gaining fall root growth and earlier maturity. If properly planted, cold temperatures will not hurt garlic.

Timing is important. A mid-September to mid-October planting allows root growth and some advance top growth. Earlier dates may lead to too much tender top growth by winter; a later date, not enough development occurs.

Soil requirements for garlic include high organic matter levels and good drainage. A waterlogged soil will cause cloves to rot. Prior to planting, add about 1 to 2 pounds of a general analysis fertilizer (12-12-12) per 100 square feet, along with compost. Thoroughly spade and till the amendments into the soil. Form raised beds if your soil is heavy or poorly drained.

Separate individual cloves from the main bulb and plant them about 4 inches apart. The larger cloves of elephant garlic should be set 6 to 8 inches apart. As a general rule, the larger the clove, the larger the bulb will be at harvest. Rows can be from 12 to 18 inches apart. Cloves should be set with tip up, and 1 to 2 inches below the soil surface.

Because garlic is a poor competitor, good fall and spring weed control is essential. Start by mulching the soil with straw or other organic materials after planting. This mulch will also help to alleviate winter frost heaving of the soil.

In heavy soils, remove the straw when growth resumes in the spring—otherwise excess moisture may rot bulbs. One or two light soluble fertilizer side-dressings in the spring will promote vigorous and uniform growth. During the growing season, garlic is susceptible to the same disease and insect problems as onions. Watch for thrips and bulb rots. But overall, garlic is relatively carefree when given a well-drained site with good air circulation and kept on a timely rotation with other vegetables.

Harvest garlic before tops completely die down, preferably with four to six green leaves still attached. Remove excess soil, but do not wash; lay whole plants on screens or hang in small bunches to dry.

Allow garlic to completely cure in a warm, well-ventilated room. Watch for rotting bulbs, remove these, and increase air circulation if needed. Curing will take about four to six weeks. At that time, roots and tops can be trimmed, and outer dirty skins can be removed. Store cured garlic in a cool, dry place. Remember, all garlic varieties taste the same at harvest time; but after curing and some storage time, individual variety flavors will come out.

A few varieties that have performed well in University of Illinois trials include “Spanish Roja” and “Carpathian”—both rocambole types. Others include “Inchelium Red,” “Idaho Silverskin,” and “Persian Star,” which are artichoke, silverskin, and purple stripe types, respectively. There are many varieties of garlic. The best source of planting stock will be specialty garden seed companies and diverse garden centers.

Question Corner

Answer provided by David Robson, horticulture educator

Q. We've had a lot of clover and weeds in our lawn for several years. What's the best way to get a fresh start for a nice lawn next year?

A. Your timing for turf renovation is perfect. Early September is a great time to renovate the lawn. Warm days, cool nights, and expected fall rains favor turf establishment. Fewer weed seeds germinate in the fall, resulting in less competition for new grass seedlings.

The renovation method used depends on a variety of factors such as the amount of desirable permanent grass present and the amount and types of undesirable weeds. Also consider thatch accumulation. Soil preparation is just as crucial for seeding and sodding as it is for planting a tree, tomato, or tulip. Unfortunately, preparation is time consuming and can be expensive. However, it is the first step in having a beautiful lawn.

For existing areas where a decent stand of grass is present and weeds are few, it may be acceptable to overseed the lawn with little preparation. Drop spreaders or slit seeders can be used to distribute seed over the area.

Slit seeders are commonly used by lawn care companies but can be rented at some rental stores. These seeders create a groove in the soil and deposit the seed into the groove. This method ensures good seed-to-soil contact, which is necessary for rapid germination and establishment.

If a drop seeder or spreader is used, lightly rake the area to work the seed into the soil. Before seeding, mow the grass to a ¾-inch height to allow germinating seedlings enough light to support their growth.

Good soil-to-root contact is essential for sod establishment.

For areas with more weeds than desirable grass, it would be wise to start from scratch. Apply glyphosate (Round-Up™, Kleen-Up) to the entire area. Glyphosate will kill any non-woody plant it touches. The entire plant, including the root system, is usually killed. Death usually occurs within days, though the visual symptoms may take a week to appear.

Take precautions to prevent spray drift on desirable ornamentals such as flowers, shrubs, and trees. As with any chemical, read and follow all label instructions.

Wait seven days and remove the dead sod and weeds. A mechanical sod cutter can be rented. It's possible to lightly rototill the area and rake out the clods. Rototill the area to a depth of 8 inches. Incorporate up to 12 inches of organic matter such as compost or leaf mold. Rototill several more times until the organic matter is distributed and the seedbed is loose and fine. Rake out any large clumps or clods. Establish a lower soil grade in the middle of the yard.

Avoid tilling the soil when it's wet. Soil structure can be destroyed by working a wet soil. A hardpan layer usually develops on the surface several weeks later, limiting water and air movement.



Send your lawn and garden questions to

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From Page 1

Remember the onion in your pantry? After onions are harvested and cured, they are put in cold storage to keep until shipped ... so they actually receive a cold treatment or are vernalized. In March, the onions we purchased have received the correct length of cold treatment. We put these pre-cooled bulbs in our dark, warm pantry—just like being underground as the soil temperatures warm in the spring. The bulb has its own food reserve, so it starts to grow.

Inspect Plants Before Bringing Indoors

David Robson, horticulture educator



Houseplants that have been outdoors during the summer need to be inspected before they are brought indoors for the winter. When plants are outdoors, natural predators and rain keep pests in check. Once moved indoors, these pests frequently become a major problem.

Spider mites are commonly brought indoors. These pests suck the juices out of the leaves, causing them to turn bronzy and die. They spin fine webbing across leaves and between the leaf and stem; they appear as specks crawling through the webbing or on the leaf underside.

Aphids are soft-bodied insects the size of pinheads that are frequently brought in with your plants. They are usually green but may be any color. They and their close relatives, the mealybugs, are found on stems and leaves where they feed on plant

sap. Mealybugs are about 1/8 inch long and are covered with white, waxy strands that make them look like tiny balls of cotton.

Spraying the plant with an insecticidal soap or some pesticides can eliminate spider mites, aphids, and mealybugs. When using a pesticide, take the plant outdoors for spraying—if possible.

Whether you use the insecticidal soap or a pesticide, treat the plant weekly for at least three weeks. Severe mealybug infestations may require treatments over a two- or three-month period.

Keep plants separated to avoid spreading insect problems between plants. Segregate plants for at least two months. Severe insect problems may not be noticeable until furnaces are turned on and the air starts drying.



In this Issue

**Fall is the Time to
Plant Spring Bulbs**

Plant Your Own Garlic

Question Corner

**Inspect Plants Before
Bringing Indoors**

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