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Fall bulbs equal spring blooms

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One of the glories of autumn is digging in the soil one last time before the end of the season, planting bulbs that hold so much promise for the first warm days of spring. The task is almost as simple as plopping a tulip bulb in a hole, but there are some things you should know to ensure success.

When to plant

Perfect bulb-planting time in the Ozarks, Zone 6, is Sept. 30 to Nov. 30, when soil temperatures reach 60 degrees. Cooler is okay; warmer is not. Bulbs need time to establish roots before the ground freezes, but if the soil

is too warm, your bulbs may sprout too early.

"You can keep planting long after the first frost," writes Scott Kunst on his Old House Gardens Web site, "as long as the soil is workable."



A reticulated iris is pictured. (Photo by Lucinda Reynolds)

Designing your bulb garden

There are so many bulbs to choose from that deciding which ones you want in your garden can be overwhelming.

"I find that daffodils are the most reliable bulbs in our area," advises



An 'Accent' daffodil is pictured. (Photo by Lucinda Reynolds)

Lucinda Reynolds, 2003 Arkansas Master Gardener of the Year, educator and speaker. "They don't rot as easily as tulip bulbs, and the deer and squirrels don't like them."

Reynolds' own daffodil garden has so many varieties, she says, "I have trouble choosing a favorite. The 'Peeping Tom'

is definitely one of the longest-lasting bloomers. It's flared back like it's out in the wind. I also love white 'Ice Follies' because they bloom so early, and everyone who comes to my garden thinks the

Daffodil is the common name for the botanical genus *Narcissus*. Jonquil, or jonquilla, with multiple blooms per stem, is one of the 12 divisions, or kinds, of daffodils. Jonquils are fragrant, whereas most other daffodils are not.



A 'Ceylon' daffodil is pictured. (Photo by Lucinda Reynolds)

pale-pink 'Accent' daffodil is wonderful."

If you favor tulips, Reynolds suggests trying species tulips.



A species tulip is pictured. (Photo by Lucinda Reynolds)

"People think of Holland when they hear the word tulip, but the tulip actually originated in the Mediterranean," she says. "Many people don't know about them, and they are a great tulip that comes back year after year, unlike the newer hybrids that may last only a few years."

When planning your bulb garden, consider that most bulbs prefer full sun.

"Daffodils," Reynolds says, "will follow the sun throughout the day. Keep that in mind when you're designing your garden, or all you'll see is the back of them."

Color, height and bloom time are also important considerations. Bulbs in Zone 6 can emerge as early as late February and as late as early May.

"The reticulated iris is an early bloomer," says Reynolds. "It's important to realize that once the weather gets hot, which sometimes happens in May, flowers just don't last very long."



"I like encouraging people to consider the minor bulbs," adds Reynolds. "Grape hyacinths, fritillaria and anemones, also called windflowers, are some of my favorites."

Masses of bulbs provide a more stunning display of color in the spring, so avoid planting your bulbs in a single line.

How to plant

Once you have your bulbs selected and in hand, it's time to grab your garden gloves and trowel or

A dibble is a small, pointed hand tool thought to date back to early Roman times. It is used to poke a hole in the soil for planting seeds or bulbs.

dibble, and head for the garden. Arrange all of your bulbs on top of the soil first so you space them correctly. Once they're planted, it's difficult to remember where they are.

Bulbs should be planted three times deeper than the bulb is high, and positioned with the roots down and the pointed end up. Follow the instructions on the package to determine how far apart to plant them.

"Don't guess," says Kunst. "Take a ruler into the garden or mark off inches on your trowel with a permanent marker. Your bulbs will thank you by growing and blooming better."

Finish your garden with an inch or so of mulch, water it well and wait for spring.

In the spring

Once your bulbs have bloomed and the flowers are spent, Reynolds says there are a few things you can do to encourage them to bloom again next year:

- ✓ Remove the spent blossoms so the plant will use its energy to regenerate the bulb rather than working to make seeds.
- ✓ The bulb regenerates via photosynthesis, so make sure the leaves turn yellow before cutting them back.
- ✓ Do not tie the leaves together as is sometimes recommended. The leaves need to remain open to the sun to do their job.
- ✓ Water sparingly or bulbs will rot during the summer.

Protecting bulbs, blooms

Kunst offers advice on protecting your bulbs from hungry animals:

- ✓ If animals dig your newly planted bulbs, try covering with plastic bird-netting, wire-mesh, a window screen or burlap bags for a couple of weeks until the inviting smell of freshly-dug earth disappears.
- ✓ If animals burrow to your bulbs, try lining the planting hole with wire mesh, plant in wire-mesh boxes or plant in buried pots covered with a square of chicken wire.
- ✓ If animals eat spring growth, cover it with chicken wire for a few weeks (while they are hungriest), sprinkle blood meal around it, fence them out or, my most successful solution, spray it with bitter, nontoxic Ro-pel, available at many garden centers. Bulbs can be dipped in Ro-pel before planting, too.