



Garden Tips & Techniques: Spring-Flowering Bulbs

Interspersing the vegetable garden with flowers adds color and beauty while drawing beneficial insects, which pollinate vegetable plant blossoms or attack insect pests. It's a great idea to plant flower varieties that bloom at different times of year, to reap their benefits throughout the growing season.

Some flowers, akin to garlic, can be planted as bulbs in the fall. It's fun to have something to plant this time of year, and satisfying in the spring when your investment of time and energy from the previous fall pays off! Flowers planted as bulbs can be some of the first to bloom. Here are some common varieties that thrive in this climate.

Very Early Bloomers:

Crocuses: These short, oval flowers are available in bright orange, yellow, purple, and white. During sunny days, they open into a star shape. Crocuses have grass-like foliage and they are some of the first flowers to bloom in the garden. Plant 3-4" deep, 3" apart. (NOT deer resistant.)

Snowdrops: These sweet little pendulous, white flowers are the first to bloom. As their name suggests, their blossoms often hang over a blanket of snow! Needless to say, they are very cold hardy. Plant 3-4" deep, 3" apart.

Hyacinth/Grape Hyacinth: These lush, clustered flowers have a scent that's to die for. Choose the large hyacinth or small grape hyacinth – also called “muscari.” Both varieties smell great and come in shades from purple to pink and white. Plant bulbs 6" deep, 6-8" apart. Grape hyacinth: 3-4" deep, 3-4" apart.

Early-Mid Spring Bloomers:

Narcissus (commonly called Daffodils): These common trumpet-shaped flowers add cheer to the garden, with their white, yellow, orange, and pink tones. Varieties of many sizes are available, from just a few inches tall, to a foot and a half or so. Blooms can be single or double, one per stem or in clusters. Daffodils are cold hardy, deer resistant, and they multiply over the years, making them a good candidate for naturalizing over large areas. Plant about 6" deep, around 6" apart.

Species, or “Botanical” Tulips: These tulips look different than typical garden tulips, with thinner leaves, star-shaped flowers, and varied growth habits. The ancient ancestors of hybridized garden tulips, these varieties are tough and hardy. They will naturalize well in the garden, and continue blooming year after year. Plant 3-5" deep and 3-4" apart.

Mid-Late Spring Bloomers:

Hybrid Tulips: These traditional garden tulips add stately beauty to the garden. They tend to peter out after a couple of years, so replant with new bulbs often. A wide variety of colors is available, and specialty types like

double or “peony” tulips and “lily flowering” tulips, with pointy petals. Plant 6-8” deep, 4-6” apart. (NOT deer resistant.)

Allium: Otherwise known as ornamental onion, these flowers are typically white, purple, or pink. The “flower” is actually a cluster of tiny blossoms in a circle or oval shape, atop a long straight stem. Choose from varieties anywhere from a few inches to a few feet tall! Plant these deer resistant bulbs based on their size: large bulbs 6” deep, 12-18” apart, small bulbs 3-5” deep, 6-8” apart.

Late Spring Bloomers:

Dutch or Siberian Iris: These beauties come in shades of purple, blue, red, pink, white and yellow. Their signature fleur-de-lis shape, with spiky green foliage, stands out as a garden accent. Plants grow a couple of feet tall. Plant bulbs in full sun to partial shade, 3-5” deep, 4” apart.

General Notes:

Choose locations that get a good amount (6 hours/day or more) of sun. But remember that trees may not have leaves yet when many of the early spring bulbs will bloom! Loosen the soil before planting and add plenty of compost, especially in compacted areas. Place short flowers in front of tall ones, so all of them will be seen. Remember that clusters of flowers generally look better than thin lines – even a couple of clusters of flowers can have a big impact. Like garlic, flower bulbs should be planted roots down, pointy end up. After planting, water well, and add a thin layer of mulch (straw or leaves) to protect the bulbs over the winter.

Planting bulbs in containers: Most bulbs can be planted in containers. Use a potting mix that drains well. In containers, ignore typical spacing requirements, and place bulbs very close to one another. They will have enough room to bloom well for one season. To combine different types of flowers in one pot – or to stagger blooming times, place one layer of bulbs lower in the pot, cover with soil, then add the smaller bulbs on top, covering with more soil. Cover with a thin layer of mulch. Store the pot in an unheated building like a garage for the winter then place outside in early spring. After blooming, all bulbs except tulips can be planted in the garden for blooms in subsequent years.