

Fall Bulb Planting Tips & Tricks

By: Dorothy Baltz

Following are the techniques I use to plant my spring flowering bulbs.

1. Purchase larger bulbs, if possible, this will ensure bigger blooms next year. If you must purchase smaller bulbs, plant more of them for maximum effect.
2. Choose bulbs that are firm and healthy looking with no mold or fungus growing on them.
3. Choose a planting location that has good drainage. If drainage is poor, add compost to the planting holes and make the holes wider and deeper than usual. I also like to mix compost with coarse sand and a little topsoil for very compacted or clay ridden areas. Fill the oversized holes with the amended soil until you have reached the proper planting depth for your bulbs. If your planting area is primarily sand, add compost to help with water retention and add nutrients to the soil.
4. Generally, bulbs should be planted twice as deep as they are tall, with their tips pointing up. If you are not sure which way is up, plant them on their side.
5. In the Northeast, spring flowering bulbs should be planted from October into November. It's best to wait until after the first frost to plant bulbs or at least 6 weeks before the ground freezes. Once nighttime temps are consistently in the 50 degree F range or lower, that's usually a good time to start. Planting earlier could cause some bulbs to rot.
6. Layer your bulbs when planting for a spectacular show. Put large bulbs like daffodils and tulips on the bottom of the planting hole, add soil, then put in a smaller bulb like crocus or grape hyacinth, add more soil, careful keeping each bulb at its proper depth.
7. When mass planting, do not allow bulbs to touch one another. Keep at least 3"-6" between larger bulbs and 1"-3" between smaller bulbs. If you decide to plant closer together, you may have to divide the bulbs sooner.
8. Include a little bone meal or bulb fertilizer in each planting hole, following manufacturer's instructions. If you are planting a large amount of bulbs in the same area, I tend to sprinkle the fertilizer over the whole bed, watering it in when I am done planting.
9. Plant bulbs in groups of 3 or 5 for maximum impact. Planting in odd numbers seem to look best. Using a triangle as your guide, plant a bulb at each tip of the "triangle". This will give you the illusion of more flowers once they begin to bloom. For a natural look, you can simply, toss the bulbs around the area and plant them where they land.

10. Avoid planting bulbs in a line. This is very unnatural looking. If you do need to plant a large amount of bulbs in a row, then I suggest using the “trenching” method. Dig a trench as long and as wide as you want the bulb bed to be, taking into account the proper planting depth for the bulb you are using. Once the trench is done, place the bulbs inside the trench, cover up half way with soil, add fertilizer, and then finish covering them up with the remaining soil. You can plant a large amount of bulbs in a short amount of time, using this method. Works well along fence lines or at the front of a flower bed.

11. If voles or squirrels are a problem, bulbs can be planted in special baskets to keep animals from digging them up and eating them. You can also line your bulb planting area with chicken wire or purchase one of the many products available on the market for repelling these animals, careful to follow the manufacturer’s instructions. There are some products you can soak the bulbs in prior to planting. This will not only repel a digging animal, but help prevent rabbits and other critters from munching on the foliage once they have sprouted in the spring. Animals will not eat daffodils or alliums, so I like to interplant them amongst other bulbs like tulips, hyacinths and crocuses.

12. Think ahead when planning your bulb placement. In the summer, I like to mark areas where I want to plant more bulbs in the fall. You can do this with a plant marker or a rock, or I like to take it one step further. Dig a hole and place one of the many nursery pots, you no doubt have lying around, into the hole (3” pots up to 8” pots work well, based on the bulbs you plan on using). Fill the pot with amended soil making sure that the rim of the pot is still visible above the ground or mulch. Once fall comes, remove the pot drop in the bulbs, and pour the soil into the hole, and you are done. This has been a great time saver for me.

13. When you are finished planting your bulbs, water the area well to help remove any air pockets in the soil and to help dissolve any fertilizers you may have added.

14. My favorite bulb planting tool is an auger that I purchased to go on my cordless drill. It makes the perfect 3” wide holes for bulbs and small perennials.