



# *bulbs bulbs, bulbs*

*in the early spring*, beautiful displays of tulips and daffodils will sprinkle landscapes around town. These and other bulbs provide bright spots of color in the chilly gray months that often make up a Flagstaff spring. Spring bulbs are a fantastic option for Flagstaff because they need the cold weather of winter to get ready to bloom, and they do not mind frost or even some snow once they start to bloom in the spring. Besides, when it comes to bang-for-your-buck, you cannot beat

daffodils that cost less than a dollar and get bigger and produce more blooms in years to come.

When bulbs start to bloom around town in March or April, many gardeners come in wishing for the same brightness and color in their own spring landscapes.

Unfortunately, the glory of spring bulbs cannot be added in the spring; it has to be planted now. Here in Flagstaff, October is the perfect time to plant spring bulbs for optimum spring color. The cool night temperatures of October mean that the bulbs can be planted now without rotting and the winter to come guarantees the necessary chill hours for bulbs to produce fabulous displays of color. So, what needs to be done to give spring bulbs the ultimate boost and ready them for the best spring color display?

Most spring bulbs need well-drained soil and at least partial sun to bloom at their best. If you live in an area of Flagstaff where clay is prevalent, amend your soil with some gypsum and add mulch or compost to improve soil texture and drainage. Be sure that the garden area where the bulb will be planted has been amended and worked to a depth of 12 inches to create a loose, well-drained soil texture. When planting, place the bulb facing upward in a hole about three times as deep as the bulb is tall. This means that large bulbs like tulips or daffodils will be planted about 8 inches deep while smaller bulbs will be planted about 4 inches deep. Planting depth is measured from the bottom of the bulb. Bulbs usually have a pointed top known as the nose and a flat bottom known as the root plate.

When planting spring bulbs in the fall, it is a great idea to fertilize them with a fertilizer high in phosphorous. Phosphorous does not move easily through the soil, so it needs to be added at the depth where the root plate will sit. Two great sources of phosphorous are Bone Meal and Super Phosphate. Either one can be added to the bottom of the hole and mixed with a small scoop of mulch before placing the bulb and filling up the hole. Top dressing with fertilizer after planting will not have the same positive effects. Just recently, a friend who is a wonderful gardener told me that she sprinkles a tiny bit of blood meal in the bottom of each hole and around the finished top area to ward off pesky animals looking to make a treat out of freshly planted bulbs. The smell helps ward off squirrels and other animals that want to dig the bulbs up and enjoy a treat. When spring comes, fertilize the area with a balanced fertilizer (all three numbers close to equal) until the bulbs flower. After the bulbs begin to flower, quit fertilizing them and enjoy the show.

How much water do bulbs need? It is a great idea to give the bulbs a good soaking right when they are planted. Other than that, they should need little additional water during the winter as long as we are receiving adequate winter moisture. A good rule of thumb is that we need at least two inches of snow every ten days to be considered adequate natural moisture. Given this amount of natural moisture, you should not need to water until shoots begin to show in the spring. When shoots appear, start watering bulbs about once a week, remembering that they need deep soaking rather than shallow sprinkling and taking care not to over-water as this promotes bulb rot.

After your bulbs flower, you are left with the leaves which many consider messy and unattractive. Some people cut the stems and leaves off; however, the leaves are necessary for the plant to photosynthesize and produce energy that will be stored in the bulb for the next years flower show. Cutting the leaves back does not give the bulb the opportunity to store energy and will negatively impact the color show in years to come. So what can you do to hide those ugly but necessary leaves? One easy solution is to layer planting beds so that the remaining bulb foliage is hidden by emerging spring perennials. Another solution is to trim back the flower stems and leave the foliage as a green accent. Once that foliage has turned yellow or brown and died back, it will not hurt the bulb to trim the foliage off and compost it.

Our days are still warm and it is still a great time to be outside. Enjoy the weather and add a beautiful spring accent to your garden by planting bulbs such as tulips, daffodils, crocus and iris. You will be glad you did next spring when you are able to enjoy your amazing display of spring color!

# *happy gardening!*