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Advice to Grow By ... Ask Us!

PLANT SUMMER-BLOOMING BULBS FOR DAZZLING COLOR

By Faith Brown, Marin Master Gardener

Want to add some brilliant color to your summer garden? Want that color to come back year after year with relatively easy care? Think summer-blooming bulbs. The possibilities include amaryllis, cannas, crocosmia, daylilies and Oriental lilies, but three of the most popular are tuberous begonias, dahlias and gladioli.

"Bulb" is actually an umbrella term for plants that store their food in underground structures, which are classified by the botanic terms true bulbs, corms, rhizomes, tubers and tuberous roots. The biggest "bulbs" yield the biggest flowers. All five types need to have water during their active growing period. After flowering, these plants benefit from an application of a complete fertilizer (10-10-10) or "bulb food," which is high in potassium and phosphorus. Their leaves should be left in place until they yellow to allow them to manufacture food for next year.

So here are three summer bloomers available in a rainbow of colors. You can find them at local nurseries in late spring, with blooms already beginning, or you can order the tubers and corms from catalogs.

TUBEROUS BEGONIAS

With blooms as big as saucers, tuberous begonias can add a wow factor to your garden or patio. Choose your color (from the palest yellow to the richest crimson), your flower shape (carnation, camellia or rose) and your form (upright or hanging). Upright begonias have enormous but fewer flowers; hanging begonias have smaller but profuse blooms, often covering the plant. Tuberous begonias are most often grown in containers.



If you buy dormant tubers, start them in midwinter in individual pots or 4 inches apart in flats. Set them indented side up atop a humus-y potting mix and barely cover them with a bit more of the mix. Place the pots or flats in a spot where they will get bright, indirect light, with temperatures above 65 degrees. Keep the soil just moist. Once the tubers produce two leaves, move them outside to a sheltered location. Bring them indoors overnight if temperatures fall below 50°F. Once temperatures have warmed, move them to their permanent containers or garden spot, where they will receive filtered sun or bright, indirect light. Avoid areas that get hot, afternoon sun, which will scorch the leaves. A week or two after the first two leaves appear, begin feeding your begonias with a liquid fertilizer. Feed monthly at full-strength or every two weeks at half strength. Keep the soil moist; mist the leaves with water daily in hot, dry areas.

In fall, when the leaves begin to yellow, gradually reduce your watering and stop fertilizing. After the leaves drop, remove the tubers from their containers, shake off the soil and allow them to dry in a cool spot for several days. Store them in a cool, dry spot. Placing the tubers in individual paper bags will prevent any diseases from spreading. In midwinter, take the tubers out, discard any rotten or diseased ones and restart them in pots or flats.

DAHLIAS

A favorite category in floral competitions, dahlias can reach the size of dinner plates. The American Dahlia Society has classified the myriad flower forms in categories that include anemone, ball, cactus, peony and waterlily. Not only can you pick the flower type that tickles your fancy, you can find them in bloom sizes ranging from 2- to 12-inches, growing on plants from one to seven feet tall.



Dahlias are grown from tuberous roots that can be planted in the spring garden once the soil has warmed and after the danger of frost --the same timing as tomato plants. Pick a site with excellent drainage and at least a half-day of full sun. Dig a hole about 1-foot deep and amend the soil you remove with plenty of compost or other organic matter before replacing it in the hole. Tall varieties need staking, so it is wise to pound a sturdy 5- to 6-foot stake into the planting hole before setting in the tuberous root 4- or 5-inches below the surface. The "eye," or growing point of the root should be facing upward and toward the stake. Cover with the amended soil. Space the holes for smaller dahlias about two feet apart and three to four feet apart for the larger varieties. If the soil is dry at planting time, water it well but then wait till sprouts appear to water again. Dahlias need regular watering to a depth of about 1-foot during the active growing season. They also benefit from regular feedings of a balanced fertilizer through late August. Dahlias should be protected from snails, slugs, earwigs and gophers.

Once the dahlia shoots reach 6-inches tall, remove all but the strongest one. When the main stem reaches 2-feet tall, tie it to the stake with twine and provide support to flowering branches as they develop. Pinching and disbudding produces the bushiest plants and showiest flowers. The Dahlia Society of California website provides illustrated instructions. <http://sfdahlias.org/how.to.grow/howto.htm>

You can leave dahlia tubers in the ground over the winter, but there is a danger that they will rot if conditions are wet and cold. To store them, wait till the tops turn yellow or brown. Cut the stalks to 4-inches above the ground and carefully dig up each clump of tubers, which will have multiplied over the summer. Shake off any loose soil, allow the clumps to dry for a few hours and then store in a cool, dark place over the winter, covered with sand, perlite or peat moss. Come spring, the clumps can be divided and you're ready for another season of spectacular blooms.

GLADIOLI

"Glads" have sword-shaped leaves and showy tubular flowers, often with flaring petals that look spectacular in arrangements. Most popular are the *Gladiolus grandiflora* hybrids, whose flowering spikes reach 3 to 6 feet high and produce up to 30 blooms in late spring and summer. Small and miniature hybrids grow three to four feet high, bear up to 18 flowers per spike and do not require staking. *Gladiolus callianthus* is a wonderfully fragrant species, bearing creamy white flowers with dark maroon markings around the center in late summer. Stems are 2-to 3-feet tall.



"Glads" need full sun and rich, well drained soil. If you want them primarily for cutting, they'll grow happily among your vegetables. For an extended blooming period, plant the corms at 1- to 2-week intervals from midwinter into spring. Alternatively, you can buy early, mid and late-season cultivars and plant them all at once from January through March. Plant the corms pointed side up, about 4 times as deep as their diameter. For best effect, plant like-colored glads in groups of five to seven, spacing the corms about six inches apart. Stakes or other supports should be placed next to the corms at planting time. In our mild Marin winters, corms can be left in the ground for several years until their performance declines; then dig them up, divide and replant.