



UC Marin Master Gardeners
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Advice to Grow By ... Ask Us!

IT'S THAT BULB-PLANTING TIME OF YEAR AGAIN

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The easiest way to assure that your next spring garden explodes with flowers is to plant bulbs right now. Daffodils, paperwhites, tulips - these are the blinking lights of spring, whether they're popping up in pots or covering forgotten hillsides.

One autumn I planted a large combo bushel of bulbs under an old pear tree. These were close-outs from various nurseries, a 100 or so laggards that didn't sell because they were misshapen or unfamiliar. I jammed them into the ground with abandon. I didn't know what half of them were, but decided to take a chance. I was floored that spring when masses of spiky, brilliant flowers of all heights and scents poked up for weeks on end, their cheery faces welcoming warmer days. That area has since been tilled and re-tilled, but I am still greeted every spring by a few diehards.

Bulbs are great for lazy gardeners like me. They demand so little, yet give back so much. Take daffodils, for instance. These charmers are popular for many reasons: they thrive in our climate, require no summer water, work in the toughest imaginable spots, multiply over the years, look fabulous in vases and are completely ignored by deer.

Sold everywhere from big box stores to online specialty nurseries, daffodils come in a wide variety of bright yellow and white, sizes and prices. Their only absolute requirement is NO summer water, which causes them to rot. In our climate, where reducing water use is revered, this is an undisputed bonus. Other than not watering, the best way to keep them coming back year after year is to wait till the foliage is yellow before cutting it off. This assures that the bulbs have gathered and stored all the energy they need for next season's flowers.



One cautionary note: Daffodils are poisonous. After cutting, they exude a toxic substance that can actually kill other cut flowers with which they are commingling. Best to let daffodils sit in their own water for an hour or so before adding them to a bouquet. This suits daffodils' botanical name, *Narcissus*, named after the young man of Greek mythology who was so enamored with his own gorgeous reflection that he fell into a pool of water and drowned. Legend tells us that from his remains sprang the first daffodil.

Tulips, or *Tulipa*, present a bit more of a challenge to California gardeners. Though historically the symbols of luck, love and fame, tulips require some work. Ironically, tulips like tougher - colder - winter conditions. They come back year after year on the steppes of eastern Turkey and in the Himalayan foothills, but in the sublime growing conditions of, say, San Anselmo, they turn their nose up at our mild winters. That's why

some tulip fanatics actually go out and throw ice on the areas where tulips are planted in the hope of luring them back out of the ground. For the rest of us, we choose to buy new sacks of tulips bulbs every year. An alternative is to purchase species tulip bulbs that have a greater chance of naturalizing, or multiplying and coming back every year. Although many of these tulips are not as large-flowering as their flashy hybrid counterparts, their repeat performances are a carefree delight. Some of the best choices of species bulbs include *Tulipa bakeri* and *Tulipa saxatilis*.

If it's fragrance you're after, make freesia your friend. These multicolored gems have naturalized in parts of Northern California, and their fragrance is powerful and plentiful. For gardeners who also love to cook, consider planting some saffron crocus bulbs. Saffron - which is often locked in a grocer's cabinet because of its high cost - is actually the dried stamen of this particular crocus bulb. In addition to adding a unique component to your kitchen garden, the diminutive crocus is often the first bulb to poke up in springtime, its purple petals a welcome contrast to winter's gray days.

Although these foreign-born bulbs often steal the springtime show, it doesn't mean there aren't equally stunning and easy California native bulbs to try. Of particular beauty and interest are the allium, calochortus and brodiaea. These bulbs send up subtle, delicate flowers in a wide variety of pastels - easy on the eye and reminiscent of a wildflower walk on Mount Tam in early March.

This fall, why not plan to bring some of Marin's outdoors into your garden? Nothing could be easier or more satisfying than sinking a few native bulbs into the earth alongside a few daffodils or tulips, only to be reminded a few months later of the secret that's been stirring underground.