

“NATURALIZED” BULB PLANTINGS

If there's one word landscape architects use over and over with regard to planning displays of spring flowering bulbs, it's "naturalize". Whether they mean "doing it the English way", or "getting back to nature", the essence of the word is: plant scattered masses of bulbs in the garden where they will acclimatize over the years with minimal maintenance. With recent emphasis on nature and environmental concerns, many people prefer an informal garden to one that is overly contrived.

Today, people like naturalistic displays of bulbs, mixed with annuals, perennials and ground covers as if Mother Nature had put them there herself.

Most spring flowering bulbs naturalize well, and those recommended include daffodils, crocuses, allium, chionodoxa, galanthus, muscari, scilla and certain varieties of tulips, including Gregii, Fosterianas, Kaufmannians and the magnificent Darwin Hybrids. Bulbs can be scattered and planted in any garden regardless of size. They will thrive under trees, among rocks, in remote corners of the garden, between shrubs and around lawns.

One suggestion is to plant masses of blue scilla under large trees in lawns, and muscari in drifts beside masses of yellow daffodils.

In residential gardens where bulbs are likely to be naturalized in dozens rather than hundreds, they look best planted near shrubs, trees and evergreens. Many residential properties are not large enough to provide real privacy. Evergreens and deciduous shrubbery not only provide property borders for privacy, they act as neutral backdrops for colourful bulb flowers. Drifts of at least twenty-five to fifty bulbs in mass plantings, inter-mixed and inter-twined, add a feeling of flow.

Choose bulbs which bloom at different times throughout spring so that when one group of flowers fades, another will be ready to burst with colour beginning with galanthus in early spring, daffodils in mid-spring and tulips in late spring. A separate care sheet has been prepared on this topic. The sweeping beauty of naturalized bulbs is enhanced when they are interplanted with annuals, perennials and ground covers. Plants which surround bulbs are also functional because they help hide unsightly ripening bulb foliage.

Spring flowering bulbs also look lovely when they are inter-planted with popular annuals such as marigolds, petunias and zinnias. If the soil is conditioned properly when bulbs are planted, naturalized gardens will require only basic care each spring.

Before planting, soil must be broken up and loosened to a depth of 10"-12". This improves drainage, an important requirement in bulb flower growing. Then mix bone meal or bulb food into the loosened soil.

After conditioning the soil, scatter the bulbs and set them firmly, pointed ends up. Plant small bulbs approximately 4" deep and large bulbs approximately 8" deep. A general rule of thumb is to plant bulbs twice as deep as they are high. It is helpful to plant bulbs deeper than required to increase the number of seasons they will bloom.

Since spacing rules are abandoned in naturalized gardens, plant masses of as many bulbs as possible, either of one colour, or of two or three congenial shades. Plant bulbs in groups of twenty to twenty-five per bed and stagger them back and forth so that the colours flow into one another, whites and pale yellows to intense pinks and purples. Mixes of too many colours and types gets too busy and should be avoided. Daffodils look best in drifts lacing in and out of ground covers, combinations of crocuses with daffodils, and tulips with hyacinths.

After bulbs are planted, water thoroughly and keep watering throughout fall until the ground freezes. The frequency of watering depends on weather conditions. You must acquire a sixth sense for watering, if necessary; stick your finger in the soil to test moisture. Water if the soil feels dry.

You may cover the bulb beds with 3"-4" of bark chips, pine bark, compost or some other mulch to stabilize ground temperature in areas exposed to the most extreme winter weather.

In spring, when shoots first appear, feed with 20-20-20 fertilizer. After bulbs have finished flowering, remove faded blooms but allow foliage to ripen. If bulbs are naturalized in lawns, be sure not to mow grass until bulb leaves have died. Naturalized gardens are permanent, requiring only very basic attention.

People who fancy simple, low-maintenance flowering bulb gardens will appreciate the informal luxuriance preferred by many leading landscape architects who design gardens the natural way.