

Nashua Farmers' Exchange
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PLAN PLAN PLAN

Bulb planting time is very exciting, and we all want to just “dig in”. Yet holding back long enough to plan is time very well spent. Take a good at your site and decide what you really wish to accomplish. Do you want to interplant with other perennials, shrubs, and/or trees? Do you want a massive blaze of glory? Do you want to extend the bloom season for as long as possible? How much direct sunlight does the site receive when the tree foliage is fully extended? Now, plot the site out on graph paper keeping in mind the time your bulbs bloom, their heights and their colors. Your finished plan will serve as a great reference for the future.

PREPARING THE SITE

Remember that planting in clumps of 7-10 or in sweeps of 50-100 bulbs makes a stunning visual statement. The same variety within the clump is far more dramatic than mixing the colors. Whether planting in clumps or en masse, the hole should be prepared the same. Dig or excavate to a depth of 12” for large bulbs (tulips, dafs, hyacinths) and 8” for small bulbs (crocus, grape hyacinths, scilla, etc.). Width of the hole will depend on the quantity of bulbs desired per clump. I plant large bulbs 2-3” apart and the small bulbs 1-2” apart. I admit I like to squish them a bit! Now separate the topsoil from the subsoil. When the hole is deep enough, place the topsoil back into the dug hole. If the soil is sandy, incorporate peat, compost, or dehydrated manure to make a 50-50 blend. If soil is high in clay, add peat and a generous sprinkling of gypsum. Sometimes it may be necessary to add sand to improve drainage of very heavy soil. For a 10-12” wide hole, then add ½ cup bonemeal or Bulb-Tone or ⅓ cup superphosphate or triple phosphate. For mass planting, figure approximately 1 tbsp. bonemeal, Bulb-Tone, or 1-2 tsp superphosphate per bulb. This will not burn bulbs. The depth to the bottom of the hole should now be at about 8” for large bulbs, and 4” for small bulbs.

PLANTING

Set the bulbs, tips UP, so that the top of the bulb is 8” below the existing soil level for large bulbs and 4” for small bulbs (You should be all set to do this if you have prepared the hole as mentioned above). I always wait until all my bulbs are set before filling in holes in case I have to change or add anything. Then fill the hole, smooth and tamp firmly. Water thoroughly if soil is dry. LABEL IMMEDIATELY!

See Q and A section at the end of the guide for more info on rodents, plant depths, etc.

MAINTENANCE

Bulbs should be fertilized with an organic rich fertilizer early in the spring when growth emerges and again in early fall with the same type of fertilizer designed for bulbs. This will ensure a continual supply of nutrient when the bulbs need it.

AFTER BLOOM

Cut back all flower stalks as far as possible, but leaves all foliage intact. Do not tie up or braid foliage, as this interferes with the plant's ability to photosynthesize energy back into the bulb. This “ripening off” period is critical to the production of bloom in subsequent years. It is also why the plants need half a day of direct sunlight AFTER bloom. To mask unsightliness of ripening foliage, interplant with annuals and perennials. When you can gently tug on foliage and it pulls out into your hand, then the bulb is fully ripened off. This is a good time to transplant if necessary.

Q AND A: TROUBLESHOOTING BULBS

Question: Why do my tulips bloom poorly or just produce foliage the second year?

Answer:

1. To perennialize most successfully, use Darwin hybrids.
2. Too much shade present. 5 hours direct sun is needed.
3. Fertilize TWICE per year.
4. Deadheads (remove dead blossoms). 30% of the bulb's energy goes into producing seedheads. Let's get that energy back into the bulb!

Question: Why should I plant so deeply?

Answer:

1. Shallow planting encourages bulbs to split and produce small bulbs which do not bloom.
2. Planting 8" deep makes it more difficult for rodents to reach bulbs. Tulips are a delicacy to rodents!
3. Planting 8" deep helps to protect bulbs from our infamous freeze-thaw cycles here in New England.

Question: Why are my bulbs getting dug up or some or none come up in the spring?

Answer:

1. Dogs and skunks are attracted to bonemeal or any product with bonemeal in it. Use superphosphate or triple superphosphate if this has happened previously.
2. Spray bulbs with a repellent such as Repels-All or use a granular form on the bottom of the hole as well as sprinkled into the hole as you fill it in..This will certainly help protect tulips, a favorite snack for mice.
3. Protection is also gained by placing sharp gravel or oyster shells around bulbs, For the easiest way out, plant dafs. They are poisonous to rodents.

Question: Do I really need to water?

Answer: YES! Water is critical to bulbs when they are extending a root system in the fall as well as when they are actively growing in the spring. Water thoroughly after planting if soil is dry. Several more soakings are advisable until ground freezes if conditions remain dry. In the spring bulbs require ½-1" of water while actively growing.

Question: Why do my dafs bud up and then not bloom.

Answer: This is a condition known as "blasting". It occurs mainly with doubles. It is believed to be caused by extreme environmental factors such as drastic temperature fluctuation or too little or too much moisture. I believe there is genetic predisposition to this condition. If it happens twice, get rid of them! Plant new varieties that are resistant.

ENJOY!

If, of thy worldly goods
Thou art bereft,
And to thy slender store
Two loaves of bread
To thee are left--
Sell one, and with
Thy dole--
Buy hyacinths to feed
Thy soul

(Persian poet, name unknown)