

## It's Time to Plant Spring-Blooming Bulbs!

By Susan Camp

As the nights grow cooler, the deciduous trees on the Middle Peninsula are changing to shimmering shades of yellow, orange, red, and maroon. And you know what that means! Well, yes, it does mean that the holiday season is rapidly approaching, and with it the excitement of shopping and cooking and celebrations. The appearance of the cool days of fall also means bulb planting time has arrived in our region.

If you have lived in Gloucester or Mathews for any length of time, you know that residents go kind of loony over bulbs of any kind. We plant hundreds of daffodil bulbs, hoping to produce great, sweeping beds of golden flowers in spring. We agonize over losing the ongoing battle with voles for the survival of our precious tulip bulbs. We force paper whites and amaryllis for winter blooms, and in February and early March we search for the first delicate crocuses peeping up from last year's leaves.

Those bulbs aren't going to bloom if you don't start planting, so what are you waiting for? Bulbs are easy to plant and require little care to produce colorful flowers in the spring.

Select your bulbs carefully. Whether you purchase them, get them from a neighbor, or dig some up to transplant, look for firm bulbs without soft spots or signs of rot. The outer scales are modified leaves that provide nutrition for the developing plant inside, so they must be intact and free of blemishes. If you have purchased new bulbs, keep them in a cool, dry place (60 to 65°F) until planting.

The two most important factors for healthy blooms are sufficient sunlight and good drainage. Plants should receive 5 to 6 hours of full sun each day. If you plan to leave bulbs in the same spot for several years, plant them where they will receive 8 to 10 hours of sunlight a day. Bulbs will bloom earlier if planted on the south side of a building.

Plant bulbs in dry soil that breaks up easily. Dig holes or beds 8 to 12 inches deep and remove weeds, rocks, and other debris. Mix 1 to 2 inches of organic matter into the soil with 5-10-10 (Nitrogen-Phosphorus-Potassium) fertilizer at a rate of 1 pound to a 5 by 10-foot bed. To plant individual bulbs, loosen the soil to the correct depth, add the fertilizer and cover it with soil to prevent direct contact with the bulb. Plant bulbs with the pointy end up and cover with the soil/organic matter/fertilizer mixture. A good rule of thumb is to plant bulbs at a depth of 2 ½ to 3 times the bulb's diameter.

Daffodils are familiar to us here on the Middle Peninsula, but there are other spring-blooming bulbs we can plant to add color and fragrance to our spring gardens, including tulips, hyacinths, grape hyacinths, and crocuses. All of these plants hail from the Middle East, Eastern Europe, the Mediterranean, or Eurasia. We can't provide the same soil and climate conditions as their native lands, so some of them will require a little extra care.

Most contain some level of chemical toxicity to humans, cats, dogs, and horses. Dermatitis, respiratory difficulty, and gastrointestinal upset are the most common symptoms. Wear gloves

when handling the bulbs, leaves, and flowers and supervise children and pets in the garden. The good news is that most pests like mice, voles, and squirrels will leave the plants alone. The exception to this is the tulip. You may need to protect your tulips from voles by planting them in cages made from hardware cloth.

See VCE Publication 426-201 “Flowering Bulbs: Culture and Maintenance” for detailed information on true bulbs, corms, tubers, tuberous roots, and rhizomes.

For specific information on planting daffodils, read my column from October 26, 2017, “Paint Gloucester Yellow Next Spring!” “Gardening Corner” columns are available on the Gloucester Master Gardeners webpage at <https://www.gloucester.info/639/Master-Gardeners>

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