

GROWING BULBS



20 Top Tips



1. **Prepare Well** — Remove weeds and incorporate lots of compost or other organic matter when planting bulbs. On heavy soils, dig-in horticultural grit. Bulbs grown in pots need good drainage, so put plenty of crocks in the bottom and use a well-drained bulb compost.
 2. **Time it Right** — Bulbs are available to buy from mid-August, but October is the best time to plant daffodils and November for tulips. Buy your bulbs whilst there is a good choice and then wait to plant them. Bulbs in packets will have the ideal planting time on them.
 3. **Big, Fat and Firm** - When buying bulbs, reject any that are soft or show signs of mould. Small bulbs may not flower in their first year.
 4. **Dig Deep** — Bulbs should be planted in holes three to four times as deep as the bulb itself.
 5. **Fritillary Finesse**— Clumps of *Fritillaria imperialis* or *F. persica* look magnificent but can be difficult to achieve; on heavy soils, the bulbs often rot during their first year. Placing the bulbs in the ground on their side will prevent water entering at the top and reduce the likelihood of them rotting.
 6. **Which Way Up?** - If you are not sure, plant the bulb on its side; its stem will find its own way up.
 7. **Force Later**— The traditional time to start forcing hyacinths into flower is the third week of September, so they flower in time for Christmas. Hyacinths will flower 10-12 weeks from potting if kept in a cool, dark room (or under a cardboard box) until they have shoots about 2in tall. 'Paper White' narcissi flower 8-10 weeks from potting and don't need to be kept in the dark.
 8. **Bulbs for Shade** — Not all bulbs need full sun. As well as woodland bulbs, grape hyacinth and some crocus can grow well in shade.
 9. **Plot with Pots** — Fill large plastic pots with your favourite bulbs, and just before they are about to flower, use them to plug holes in the border. Plastic pots can also be slipped inside more elegant terracotta ones and whipped out when the bulbs are over. Store the pots behind a shed to allow the foliage to die down, top-dress with a layer of compost in the autumn, and bring them out again the following year.
 10. **Mark the Spot**—Plant labels can look ugly but are indispensable for marking the position of bulbs whose foliage has died back. A discreet wooden label will prevent the frustration caused by plunging a fork into a border and spearing a clump of your favourite alliums.
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11. **Hedge Dwellers**—The dry conditions at the base of hedges make ideal growing conditions for many bulbs. Tulips, and particularly species tulips, will be very happy on the south-facing side of a hedge, and can be left undisturbed for years.
 12. **Damp Lovers**—Most bulbs need a period of dry conditions, but some only thrive in moist soils. In the wild, camassias grow in rich, moist meadows and need similar conditions in the garden. *Leucojum* also flower better in moist soils. The Snake's Head fritillary only flourishes when grown in a damp soil.
 13. **Singular Beauty**—Eighteenth-century gardeners planted tulips individually, to appreciate their beauty. Bulbs planted singly in small terracotta pots and placed in an ordered manner around the garden bring instant elegance and formality.
 14. **Enemy Tactics**—The biggest destroyer of bulbs is the squirrel. They dig up daffodils but don't eat them. They have a particularly voracious appetite for crocus and tulips. Planting the bulbs deeper can help. Bulbs are most vulnerable after planting, when the soil is easy for squirrels to dig. Chicken-wire placed over the pot or the freshly-dug soil will deter them.
 15. **Lawn Games**—It's not just crocus that will grow in lawns and short grass. Many miniature irises will be perfectly happy in a lawn that does not become waterlogged. To plant, remove the turf with a spade, place the bulbs underneath and replace the turf. Don't cut the lawn until the bulbs' foliage has died down.
 16. **Long Grass**—Bulbs can also be grown in long, rough grass if you choose tall varieties that can compete. *Fritillaria pyrenaica* grows to about 18in tall and is easy and vigorous, even in grass. Narcissi are well-adapted to growing in grass.
 17. **Viola Partners**—Wallflowers or forget-me-nots are the traditional partners for tulips. In pots and window boxes, use violas instead; they will start flowering long before the tulips and provide a wide range of colour combinations.
 18. **More Please**— For sheer flower-power, bulbs are the cheapest plants available, so don't stint on the quantities you plant. Even in small gardens, massed plantings of a limited number of varieties is always most effective. In pots, allow for a dozen tulips per 12in container.
 19. **Lift and Repeat**— Left in the ground, tulips degenerate each year until they die; lifted, stored and replanted the following November, they re-flower well. After flowering, remove the seed head and wait for the foliage to yellow and die back, then lift the bulbs, clean off any soil and store in boxes or net bags in a cool, dry place.
 20. **Limit Your Layers**— Plant-up pots and window boxes with no more than two layers of bulbs to prevent the unsightly spectacle of later-flowering plants appearing through the dying foliage of earlier ones.