



BULB BASICS

Source: www.bulb.com



WHAT IS A BULB?

Just think of it as an underground storehouse with a flower (or sometimes many flowers) hidden away in the center. The food in that storehouse will provide the energy for healthy flowers in the spring. The word 'bulb' has come to mean a whole group of plants that get their blooming power from underground storehouses. They include:

1. the true bulbs, such as tulips, daffodils and hyacinths
2. corms, such as crocus and gladiolus
3. tubers or roots, such as dahlias and begonias

SUMMER BLOOMING BULBS

Summer-flowering bulbs originate from tropical and sub-tropical regions. Along with a love of warm weather, they bring the exuberant look of tropical abundance, but are usually are not winter hardy. In general summer bulbs fall into the category of tender bulbs, which do not perennialize in zones that experience frost in winter.

When do I plant?

Summer bloomers such as Dahlias, Begonias, Lilies, Gladiolus and Callas should be planted in late spring or Mid- May after the danger of hard freezing - soil temperatures should be at least 13°C or 55°F. If planted too soon, the bulbs will not begin active growth which can easily cause the bulb to rot. Summer-flowering bulbs are generally planted close to the surface (3-5cm or 1-2 inches deep), where the soil is warmer. Autumn crocuses can be planted in early summer.

What is the best way to prepare a bulb bed?

Summer bulbs can be planted anywhere that you would plant any other plant. Many bulbs from tropical climates, such as caladiums and gingers tend to do better when planted in soils that stay moist during the bulb's period of dormancy. Bulbs like gladioli and crocosmias, native to alpine and desert areas where soils are drier, will do best in soils that drain well and stay drier during their winter dormancy. Consequently, it is a good idea to plant these bulbs somewhat deeper than the cultural instructions suggest.

The soil at the site must be well drained! This is a critical factor for planting flower bulbs. On the other hand, wherever other plants grow, bulbs will grow too! One method to determine if the site drains well is to observe the proposed planting area the day after an intensive rainfall. If water remains in the selected spot, then the soil does not drain adequately. If this is the case, another spot should be selected, or the drainage needs to be improved.

Do you have to water bulbs after you plant them?

Yes. This is the single most important step to insuring good bloom. Bulbs begin immediately to form their roots. So you should give them plenty of water, especially if the soil is dry or in a dry period.

Should the bulbs be fertilized?

You should fertilize the bulbs with an organic all-purpose fertilizer containing bone meal or super-phosphate, but not too much nitrogen. This feeding will, at the same time, rebuild the bulb for next year's flowering.

How long should the flowers remain on the stem?

Don't let your bulbs begin to form seed pods... this drains the bulb of the energy it should be storing up for next year's blooms. Cut the flowers off as soon as they've faded, but leave the foliage and stems to bring energy back to the bulb for next year. Deadheading certain bulb flowers like dahlias, caladiums, anemones, cannas, and crinums will encourage them to re-bloom.

Can bulb foliage be cut off when the flowers fade?

The bulb needs its leaves to rebuild for next year's growth so leave it until it dies down naturally. Try camouflaging dying foliage with pretty annuals, groundcovers and perennials.

Do I need to mulch?

Mulch is not required but it is often beneficial. Three inches is plenty, but wait until the ground cools down. Contrary to popular notion, mulching over bulbs is meant to retain soil moisture and keep the ground temperatures cool and stable, not to serve as a "warm winter blanket" (except in the very coldest climates). Mulch just before the ground freezes.

Harvesting And Storing Tender Bulbs

After the leaves of tender bulbs have been killed by frost, harvest the bulbs for winter storage. Dig up the entire root system and shake off the soil, remove the dead or dying leaves close to the bulbs, and place the bulbs in dry peat moss, chipped leaves, perlite or wood shavings in an open paper bag or container that will allow them to breathe. Store in a warm, dry place. A garage that's kept above freezing is fine.

If this process sounds too cumbersome, you can treat summer-flowering bulbs as annuals; some are less expensive than many annuals anyway. You may also be surprised to find bulbs you've written off as too tender to survive the cold will indeed come up again in spring.

HAPPY PLANTING!