

Extension Notes

Personal Column for September 28, 2010

By Gary Hall, ISU Regional Extension Education Director

Plant Spring-flowering Bulbs Today

Procrastination is one of my strong points. I can put off all kinds of things without a second thought. But I am also envious of those who get their bulbs planted now and enjoy beautiful flowers next spring. So the procrastinator in me must fight with the desire to see those spring flowers.

Now is an excellent time to plant spring-flowering bulbs such as crocus, tulips and daffodils. I can't procrastinate because these plants need to develop roots in the fall. They also must meet a chilling requirement over the winter in order to bloom in the spring.

When choosing a planting site, be sure it will have full sun to partial shade. The ideal soil would be a sandy loam, but even poor soils can be used if organic material such as peat moss, compost, or aged bark is mixed in. For example, heavy clay can be amended by mixing in one-third to one-half organic material. Soil pH should be between 6.0 and 7.0.

Bulbs need good aeration as well as good drainage for proper development. It is best if the bulbs are given 12 inches of prepared soil. If one-third organic material were added, this would require mixing 4 inches of organic material with 8 inches of soil. Incorporate about five tablespoons of a complete fertilizer such as a 10-10-10 during preparation or fertilize according to your soil test which you can obtain from your local Extension office.

Planting depths vary depending on the size of the bulbs you are planting. For example, tulips and hyacinths are set about 6 inches deep, and daffodils are put 6 to 8 inches deep. Smaller bulbs are planted shallower. As a rule of thumb, bulbs are planted two to three times as deep as their width. Planting depth is the distance from the bottom of the bulb to the top of the soil.

Large bulbs are normally spaced 4 to 6 inches apart, and small bulbs about 1 to 2 inches. To get a real "Wow" factor consider planting the bulbs in clumps or irregular masses which will produce a better display than planting singly.

After placing the bulbs at the proper depth, replace half the soil and then add water. This will settle the soil around the bulbs and provide good bulb-to-soil contact. Add the remaining soil and water again. Although you won't see any top growth in the fall, the roots will be developing, so soil should be kept moist but not wet. You could even add some mulch after the soil has frozen to prevent your small bulbs from being heaved out during freezing and thawing of the soil.

Avoid that temptation to procrastinate. Plant your spring flowering bulbs now. Then regardless of the kind of winter we have you can look forward to the promise of those beautiful spring flowers.

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