

Naturalizing with bulbs

Spring flowers are thrilling in the landscape. They herald the end of the gray, dreary winter and the arrival of a colorful spring.

Now is the time to plant these sparkling gems in the landscape. Today let's discuss how to establish a low-maintenance naturalized planting.

Not all bulbs work in naturalized plantings. We need to select vigorous bulbs that can establish themselves in the landscape and thrive under minimal care.

The classic performers for naturalizing include daffodil, grape hyacinth, crocus, scilla, and glory-of-the-snow.

Everyone loves tulips, but we need to be especially careful when looking for tulips for naturalizing. Botanical tulips such as 'Orange Emperor' (shown below) work well. Greigii tulips such as 'Little Red Riding Hood' and 'Toronto' will delight you with their bouquet of blooms. Among the more traditional tulips, focus

on the Darwin hybrids, which show exceptional vigor.

Select a sunny spot with good drainage. A site with filtered sun is acceptable, especially if the sun is filtered by leafy trees (not evergreens). Some of the most attractive natural beds are planted with shade trees in the background. This location works since the bulbs will grow in spring before the leaves of the trees are fully open and casting deep shade.

Mother Nature never plants in rows—she plants in drifts and clumps. Likewise, we should not plant in rows. Let's use curved and flowing lines. You can start by using a garden hose or rope to outline your bed. Keep the shape of the bed irregular.

Scatter three-fourths of the bulbs in the bed. Some

gardeners just toss them up in the air to get a random effect.

Then we can make some minor adjustments with the rest of the bulbs. Fill in some empty spaces or maybe put a couple bulbs outside the outlined bed. Make sure every bulb has enough room to get established.

Then comes the hard work—planting the bulbs. Bulb planters are available at garden centers. I have never liked *hand* bulb planters. I get tired after making just a few holes. I much rather prefer using bulb planters that work like shovels. You simply step on the spade-like planter and you can create a hole quickly. You can plant a bed of bulbs quickly and easily with this tool. Augers that attach to power drills work well, too.

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It's a good idea to make all of the holes before you start covering the bulbs—otherwise you can get confused and miss some spots.

Cover the bulbs with the native soil, compost, or a mixture of both. Some gardeners report the organic fertilizer Milorganite will repel critters from digging the bulbs.

Enrich the bed with a bulb fertilizer that contains slow-release nitrogen. These fertilizers often have a formulation of 5–10–5 or something similar. In the past we fertilized bulbs with bonemeal but this is no longer recommended. Bonemeal attracts critters that dig up bulbs and modern methods of processing bonemeal greatly diminishes its nutrient content.

Water the bulbs and then wait for the spring show!

Naturalized plantings will last a long time with minimal help—but you can't ignore them. A fertilizer application every fall will be appreciated. You can also fertilize at the first sign of yellowing in spring/early summer.

Allow the plants to naturally die back in spring. Trim off the flower stalks after the blooms fade (this prevents the plant from wasting energy on producing seed pods) and allowing the foliage to naturally yellow. Once the foliage turns yellow, the bulb is replenished and ready for next spring. 