

# BULBS

Embracing a wide range of decorative plants, bulbs provide exciting effects throughout the year, with large drifts of snowdrops in late winter, daffodils and tulips in spring, the exquisite perfume of lilies and vibrant dahlia colours in summer, and spidery flowers of nerines in autumn.

## BULB DEFINITIONS

Bulbs are divided into smaller plant categories, including true bulbs, corms and tubers. All of these swollen, underground, food-storage organs help the bulb to survive periods of drought.



**Bulb**  
A true bulb is a storage organ made up of stems and fleshy leaves inside. Examples include daffodils, tulips, and eucomis (above).



**Corm**  
Swollen stems that have adapted to store food are known as corms. They appear solid throughout, and include crocuses (above).



**Tuber**  
Tuberous plants have swollen underground roots or stems. Examples include cyclamen, dahlias (above) and begonias.

## What are bulbs?

The term bulb can be used to describe all swollen, underground, food-storage organs, and includes true bulbs as well as corms, rhizomes and tubers. True bulbs have fleshy scales – modified leaves or leaf bases – that overlap and are often enclosed in a papery tunic, as in narcissi, or they may be naked and loosely arranged like lily bulbs.

Corms are compressed and enlarged stem bases, usually enclosed in a fibrous or papery tunic, as in the crocus. Each corm lasts one year, and is replaced by a new one after flowering. Tubers, such as cyclamen, are solid, underground sections of modified stem or root and seldom possess scales or tunics. Rhizomes are modified stems that creep at or just below soil level, and may be thin and wiry or swollen and fleshy.

A few bulbs are evergreen, but most grow and bloom during a short season, and then die back to below ground level. Their leaves produce the food store for the

**BELOW Carpets of spring colour**  
A selection of daffodils has been naturalized in the grass beneath silver birches and spring-flowering trees, creating a sea of nodding yellow flowers.



following year, which is why the foliage must not be cut down after flowering but allowed to wither naturally.

When below ground, bulbs are described as dormant but they are, in fact, ripening and developing the following year’s flowers, and must be planted in a suitable site to thrive. Bulbs that originate from dry, hot climates, such as nerines and watsonias, need warm, dry conditions when dormant to aid ripening and flower formation, while those from woodland or other damp, shaded habitats, such as bluebells (*Hyacinthoides*) and snowdrops (*Galanthus*) require a cool, slightly moist spot.

## Designing with bulbs

There are bulbs to suit all garden designs and planting styles. They range in size from the tiny *Iris danfordiae* and autumn daffodil (*Sternbergia lutea*), both suitable for a scree or rock garden, to carpeting erythroniums for the dappled shade of a woodland garden, midrange alliums and tulips for a hot, sunny border, and tall, slender regal lilies that produce highly scented flowers on stems up to 1.8m (6ft) in height. The

flower forms also lend themselves to certain garden styles. Tulips with sculptural cupped flowers planted *en masse*, and the sharp flower shapes of many dahlias are ideal for formal schemes, while the looser flower forms of nectaroscordums and turks-cap lilies, and arching spikes of crocosmias create an informal look. Turf spangled with crocuses or snake’s-head fritillaries (*Fritillaria meleagris*) mimics their wild habitat and provides early colour in naturalistic schemes.

Bulbs add seasonal colour and interest to mixed borders with annuals, shrubs and perennials. Daffodils (*Narcissus*), crown imperials (*Fritillaria imperialis*), alliums, and dahlias, all blend well with other types of planting. Unscented lilies make good partners for scented roses, while exotic looking cannas and alstroemerias add spice to a tropical design. If you can’t squeeze bulbs into your border, many are perfectly at home in containers and baskets.

## Year-round interest

Choose carefully, and you can have a bulb in flower for most of the year. The first to appear in late winter are the snowdrops (*Galanthus*) and winter aconites (*Eranthis*), while early narcissus, muscari, crocuses, scillas, chionodoxas, dwarf iris and *Anemone blanda* mark the onset of spring.

In mid-spring, fill your garden with vibrant yellow daffodils and bright tulips, or opt for the same plants in pastel shades – the choice is vast for both genera. Summer-

## NATURALIZING BULBS

You can create spectacular effects by naturalizing bulbs in a lawn or under trees. Choose robust plants, such as snowdrops, daffodils and crocuses, which are able to compete with trees roots and grass. To achieve a natural random effect, toss the bulbs in the air and plant them individually where they fall. For each bulb, dig out a small plug of soil and turf, two to three times the depth of the bulb. After flowering, when the leaves have died, mow the grass.



## LAYERING BULBS IN CONTAINERS

Pots brimming with spring bulbs lift the spirits after a long winter, but you need to plan ahead to create the most spectacular displays. In autumn, look out for bulbs at garden centres or in mail-order catalogues, and check flowering times for a synchronized display of tulips, daffodils and grape hyacinths (*Muscari*).



A multi-coloured display.



**1 Plant in layers**  
In autumn, place crocks at the bottom of a large pot and add a 5cm (2in) layer of gravel. Then add a layer of good quality compost. Place the largest bulbs, such as daffodils, on the surface and cover with more compost so that the tips are just visible.



**2 Cover the bulbs**  
Now place the next layer of bulbs, such as tulips, between the daffodil bulbs, and cover with more potting compost. Finally add small bulbs, like grape hyacinths, on this top layer, and cover with compost. Press down lightly with your hands, and leave the pot in a sheltered sunny spot.

flowering bulbs, such as *Galtonia candicans*, most alliums, the Peruvian daffodil (*Hymenocallis naricissiflora*) and ornithogalums offer colourful highlights.

These are followed in late summer by gladioli, crinums, dahlias, and crocosmias, which may continue to bloom into the autumn until the frosts arrive. When the

summer spectacle is over, select autumn-flowering nerines, crocuses, colchicums and cyclamen, and to end the year display, use *Cyclamen hederifolium*, whose marbled foliage often persists into winter.

For scented bulbs, choose hyacinths, bluebells, and scented daffodils for spring, and lilies and crinums for summer displays.

## BULB PLANTING PLANNER

Type of bulb	Planting Time	Planting depth	Preferred Conditions
Agapanthus	spring	10cm (4in)	Full sun in moist, but well drained soil
Allium	autumn	5–15cm (2–6in)	Full sun in moist, but well drained soil
Colchicum	late summer	10cm (4in)	Full sun in well-drained soil
Crocus (spring) Crocus (autumn)	autumn late summer	8cm (3in) 8cm (3in)	Full sun in well-drained soil Full sun in well-drained soil
Cyclamen	autumn	10cm (4in)	Partial shade in well-drained soil
Galanthus	early autumn	2.5–5cm (1–2in)	Full sun or partial shade in moist soil that does not dry out in summer
Hyacinthus	autumn	10cm (4in)	Full sun or partial shade in moist, well-drained soil
Lilium	autumn	10–15cm (4–6in)	Full sun or partial shade; most prefer acid to neutral well-drained soil.
Muscari	autumn	5cm (2in)	Full sun in well-drained soil
Narcissus	autumn	10–15cm (4–6in)	Sun or partial shade in any reasonable, well-drained garden soil
Tulipa	late autumn	8–15cm (3–6in)	Full sun in well-drained soil