

“October in the garden” most likely conjures thoughts of mums, fall colors and gourds. For most of us thoughts of pale pink tulips, grape hyacinths, or lemon yellow daffodils are furthest from our minds; after all, these are the things of spring. But, if every spring you find yourself regretting the lack of floral display in your garden, then this October is the time to do something about it.

Spring-flowering bulbs provide their floriferous displays only if planted at the appropriate time. These plants require a dormant, cold period in order to stimulate root growth and promote flowering. They perform best when planted before the first hard frost of fall, so for central Virginia, there is no better time to plant spring-flowering bulbs than October.

Some of the plants commonly referred to as spring-flowering bulbs are tulips, hyacinths, daffodils, crocuses, irises, scilla, fritillaria, and eremurus. They are categorized as “spring-flowering” because they flower before much else has emerged in the early spring garden, sometimes even through blankets of snow and as “bulbs” for their physiological attributes.

The term “bulb” specifically refers to a plant that has emerged from a thickened, modified, underground stem that originally contained the entire plant and stored the food necessary to drive the plant’s growth. Generically, “bulb” refers to any plant with underground food storage capacity. Hence, while distinctly different from a true bulb, corms and tubers are frequently referred to as “bulbs.”

If you are considering adding bulbs this fall, be certain you have the right location to plant them. Bulbs will thrive in almost any light condition, but do best in full to partial sun. They require good drainage, as they will rot if left in standing water. If necessary, complete any soil amendments prior to planting, as most springflowering

bulbs are hardy and will remain in the same location year after year, meaning that planting time will be the only opportunity you have to do much in the way of soil amending. A bulb fertilizer can be applied in subsequent falls to ensure continued growth and flowering.

When choosing a location to plant bulbs, consider that after their flowers have faded, their foliage will begin to yellow and look spent. This foliage should be allowed to remain, as bulbs rely on the nutrients moving from the foliage into the bulb where it is stored as food reserves. Pruning spent foliage from a bulb could result in a reduced life expectancy of the bulb. You can however, plan to disguise spent plants from view. Consider inter-planting bulbs with other perennials such as hostas, daylilies, and peonies that will leaf-out and hide the yellowing leaves of bulbs. To enhance the show of your spring-flowering bulbs always plant them in clusters or groupings. Single flowers are seldom dramatic and lines or rows of bulbs make little impact.

Some bulbs have quite noticeable tops and bottoms; others are more difficult to distinguish. The general rule of thumb when planting bulbs is to attempt to place them upright. Large bulbs of two inches or greater should be buried about eight inches deep, while smaller bulbs should be placed about five inches deep. Once bulbs are planted they should be generously watered. Saturate them and maintain constant moisture for one to three weeks. After this initial period of watering, bulbs will continue to thrive on virtually no supplemental watering; thus

making them not only a beautiful addition to the spring garden, but also a drought tolerant one.

This October take the opportunity to plan ahead for a beautiful, low maintenance spring garden. Take a moment to look over the bulb catalogues that have been pouring in over the last few months and choose some favorites. Next spring you will be wondering why you waited so long to add bulbs to your garden.