

Bulbs in borders prove the usefulness of such plants. Feature bulbs during the early spring--through the first three months of the border; not much else blooms until summer. Mixed judiciously with annuals, biennials, and perennials, the border can be a low-care showpiece that focuses on different points as the weeks pass. Some pruning, replanting to replace spent bulbs, and dividing overcrowded growth are all that's necessary over the years. As you plan, remember that the smaller the bloom, the larger the number of bulbs you'll need. Two dozen daffodils may be enough to make a full drift, but you may easily need three or four times that many of the small galanthus bulbs.

Put bulb flowers with long leaves behind perennials. The perennials' flowers and leaves will grow up and cover the aging bulb plant foliage after the tulips, daffodils, alliums, and other bulb plants yellow with age.

Early bulbs can be accompanied by almost-as-early perennials, which tend to be low enough to act as a ground cover even for the midget bulbs. Or use the perennials' leaves as a foreground for the elegant red fosterana tulip and for single or double early tulips.

Take care to separate vibrant colors from each other, using white or creamy flowers, delicate leaves of hostas, ground covers, creeping evergreens, or the foliage of a plant flowering later.

When planning and combining colors, first decide where to put the tulips. Start at the back with the tallest plants, then those of medium height, and finally the shortest. Catalogues will give heights and blooming times. Start with white or the lightest color in the center of the border, and gradually move to either edge with medium and darker colors. Fill in with low underplantings or ground covers if the front row leaves a gap between bloom and the ground.

If planning and paperwork don't appeal to you, keep one hint in mind: plant bulbs in drifts and patches of similar colors and varieties, rather than mixing them. A calculated mix--such as tall daffodils and grape hyacinths--is attractive, but save the third and fourth kind of bulb for another clump.