

With the delicate scent reminiscent of yesteryear, hyacinths formally define edges of flower beds and borders. In addition to shades of rose pink, white, and yellow, hyacinths provide distinctive blues, a color their popular planting companions--tulips and daffodils--don't have. In fact, one of the most appealing planting arrangements includes a blue variety, backed up by yellow tulips or daffodils.

Dutch, common, or garden hyacinth--no matter what you use as the everyday name for *Hyacinthus orientalis*, this species is the most popular of the hyacinth brood. Followed by a multitude of varieties and hybrids, *H. orientalis* is known for its full, compact spike of small flowers. It may grow as tall as 15 inches.

One variety, *H. orientalis 'albulus'* or Roman hyacinth, is a fragrant bulb easily forced to bloom indoors in the midst of winter. Smaller and with looser blooms than the parent group, the Roman hyacinth is hardy outdoors only in the South.

Uses of hyacinths

The reasons for planting hyacinths are perhaps less numerous than for other spring bulbs. But, because the odor is so refreshing, you'll want to plant them at the front of borders and near the house or walk.

The hyacinth is less hardy than other bulbs and must be well protected in winter. It fails to produce vigorous blooms after about three years.

Plant enough bulbs to fill any areas you designate for hyacinths. Because of their upright growth, they don't wave around as much as long-stem flowers, and a loose planting can look sparse and spotty. Clumps of hyacinths work well as accents in the perennial border. Placed in front of taller iris, hyacinths appear to be growing from the same leaves. And they bring a touch of sky blue and yellow sunshine to sunny or semi-shady spots between lawn and dark green shrubs or at the corners of foundation plantings.

Planting hyacinths

Planting hyacinths is similar to the method used for tulips. They may be planted from September to December, depending on the time of hard freeze in your zone. September and October are generally best to allow them time to develop a root system before the ground hardens. But there's no plus in early planting, because the bulbs will put out roots only after the air temperature drops to about 40 degrees Fahrenheit. Moisture will be needed to help the bulbs develop strong roots before hard freezing.

Take care to plant in soil that drains rapidly--even after extensive rains. Hyacinths cannot tolerate wet or heavy soils. Plant six inches apart in circles or straight lines and eight inches deep. In good soils, do not add fertilizer. Hyacinths are sensitive to rot in rich lofts.

Hyacinths grow well (and last longer) in partial shade. However, you will probably get more perfect blooms in a spot with both full sun and natural protection against strong spring winds. As with other bulb plants, hyacinth foliage must be left for a month or so after bloom; the foliage helps produce food for the next season.

Bulb care

After foliage dies, the next steps depend on where you live and the work you're willing to do. Hyacinths won't bloom as many years if you leave the bulbs in the ground over the winter. A heavy mulch will help, or dig the bulbs up for dry summer storage.

Brush the soil off them, and place in a cool, shaded place for replanting in the fall. Lift the bulbs, too, if you want to replant the area completely with bedding plants after the hyacinth foliage ripens.