

In autumn, prepare for a brightly colored spring by planting hardy bulbs. The planning starts when you decide what to put where and then order the tulips, daffodils, hyacinths, or dozens of tiny species bulbs. If bulbs are to thrive, a good location and good soil preparation are important.

While bargains abound in many phases of gardening, there are few discount bulbs. The cheap bulbs may disappoint you and produce few or no blooms. The savings come when your care makes top-quality bulbs flower for years.

The first inexpensive tools to use are pencil and paper. Draw a diagram of where you'll plant and how many bulbs will be needed. As you order the bulbs, note the varieties and colors on the diagram. Because minor bulbs are so small, plan for plenty. Use no fewer than two dozen of each. Four dozen will sparkle even more when they freshen a gray, almost-spring day. Galanthus, grape hyacinths, and crocus multiply over the years.

Bulb quality depends not only on size, but also on firmness, weight, and covering. Even if a bulb is large, it may be light and spongy or have cut, bruised outer scales. If you buy at a garden supply center, do your own spot checks. Examine bulbs carefully; squeeze them, check heftiness, and look for the larger sizes.

If any time elapses between purchase and planting of bulbs, be sure to store them in a dry, dark, cool place--temperature not over 50 degrees Fahrenheit. If you plant on a warm, sunny day, never leave bulbs in the sun. Even a short time under such conditions will noticeably reduce the size of blooms.