

Examine soil

Whether bulbs are for one year or many, drainage is still a critical element. Lack of it results in poor root growth and development of bulb rots. Daffodils can be naturalized in fairly moist places, so long as the ground isn't waterlogged.

In areas such as beds, clumps, and borders, take time to improve the drainage of soil high in clay. Add sand, peat, or vermiculite to a depth of 12 inches (or a full spade depth). If soil is too sandy, work in rich peat or compost. The actual depth for planting bulbs varies according to the variety and the soil--deeper in light, sandy soil, but more shallow in heavy clay. If the soil is well-drained, try planting most tulips at a ten-inch depth, rather than the usual eight. An added benefit: after foliage dies, you can plant late annuals right over the tulips. The tulips will last longer when planted at a little greater depth.

To plant a clump of bulbs, dig a hole nine to 12 inches deep, and replace loose soil until the depth is correct for your bulbs. Mix in fertilizer. Set each bulb point up, and press gently into the loose soil below the base.

For a bed of several types of bulbs, outline the area for each group with the end of a rake handle. Space tulips and other big bulbs fairly close (five or six inches) to make a splashy color effect. Wide spacing weakens their impact. Put all bulbs in place, inside outlines, before you plant. Set the bulb firmly in place. Then cover with soil.

Choosing fertilizer

For bulb beds, spade in a fertilizer high in phosphorus, calcium, and magnesium as you plant. Or work bone meal into the soil at the bottom of the hole or bed. Top-dress with balanced fertilizer after blooming. Although bulbs contain their first season's food supply, fertilizing is recommended to foster future growth. Plant food will help bulbs root faster. Compost will give them an extra boost too. When you plant, label clumps with both variety name and color. This will prevent digging in the wrong place if you plant other flowers to bloom after the bulb foliage has died. It will also help you locate various types when it's time to divide old clumps.

Fighting pests

Field mice and chipmunks are a menace to newly planted bulbs in some areas. To reduce the danger, don't plant bulbs next to garden walls or house foundations where the little animals make runs. And before planting in the fall, clean beds of all garden waste that could make ideal nests for mice.

The only sure way to protect newly planted bulbs against mice and chipmunks is to place the bulbs in baskets fashioned from hardware cloth, their tops left open. But this technique is too time-consuming and expensive except in smaller gardens.

Other pests? Quality bulbs are subject to few insects or diseases. But if a plant should show signs of disease, such as misshapen foliage, lift and destroy the entire plant, so the disease will not spread.

Water and mulch

Drought is one pest you can battle. Water the bulbs after planting to settle the soil and give them a good start, and water beds liberally during dry spells. Try to keep water from getting on the leaves. Supplement rainfall when necessary; give beds the equivalent of one inch of water a week.

When there's talk of water for the garden, mulch is sure to be mentioned too. A three- or four-inch layer of good mulch, such as cocoa bean hulls, straw, wood chips, compost, or ground corncobs, will conserve soil moisture, keep down weeds, prevent extreme temperature fluctuation during the winter, and enrich the soil as the mulch breaks down.

Applying several inches of mulch over perennial beds that include spring-flowering bulbs is a wise precaution anywhere but is vital in areas where sudden thaws and freezes might cause the ground to heave, damaging bulbs and roots. The best materials are those that let rain and melting snow come through easily, keeping moisture levels adequate. Because the arrival of spring varies widely from area to area--and even from week to week within the same area in different years--the safest way to decide when to remove mulch is to make frequent checks as the weather begins to warm. Usually, when bulb foliage is two inches above soil, it's time to take off the mulch.