

Bulbs

by Cass Turnbull



Is it too late to plant my bulbs?" you might be wondering. Or more accurately, "Can I still plant that small fortune in bulbs I ordered and then neglected in the garage for three months?"

Yes, you can plant them with every expectation that they will grow and bloom next spring. In the Seattle area, you can plant right up to the first of the year, though the longer you wait, the iffier success becomes. Success also depends on whether they were stowed in the proverbial cool, dry place, such as an unheated garage. If you left them in the house where they can get dry and desiccated, they may be dead.

Alternatively, if you left them in the damp carport, they may have gotten soft and smoochy, indicating that they are rotten and dead.

Learning to ID dead and troubled bulbs is useful when you go to clean up at the bulb sales at the end of the year. Just pick up the net bag and start squeezing and closely inspecting bulbs before you grab the ones

© PlantAmnesty

you want.

I think people really spend too much time fussing over their bulbs. Minimize the agony. I know it's icky out there, but if the bulbs are still good, just march outside during the next sun break, scootch aside some leaves, and get down on your hands and knees. Stab straight down in into the ground with your skinny trowel and pull the dirt back toward you making a slot in the ground for your bulb. If the dirt is hard, stab the same hole twice to get enough depth. Then jam in a bulb, pointy side up and shove the dirt back over it. Press down once with your fingers or hand to firm it up, once.

Repeat till the bag is empty. Voila, ready for spring.

What about bone meal? I have never bothered with it. More and more, using bone meal for bulbs is considered a garden myth, which suits me just fine.

I've developed a few other opinions about bulbs over the years that I am happy to share.

PlantAmnesty ▲▲▲

1. Plant in masses or drifts, using way, way more bulbs that you think you should in any area. Plant them way closer together than the package recommends. To get a natural look, gently toss the bulbs on the ground and plant them where they land.

2. Don't plant hybrid tulips. The drying foliage looks like heck, and the plants slowly disappear over the years leaving a lone tulip or two here and there, looking goofy and clashing with whatever is there now. Species tulips are okay. A good way to use hybrids is to plant them tight in big pots for the patio and then wheel them to the utility area when they are through blooming where they can brown out, out of site. Use a hand truck.

3. Daffodils are better. If you want to sound snooty, call them jonquils or narcissus. They last many more years than tulips—some people say they even increase in number. Unfortunately, like tulips, they leave ugly brown foliage lying on the ground after they are through blooming.

We are told that we need to leave the foliage to ripen and go brown, thus feeding the bulbs below ground. To make fading leaves look better for now, I use my fingers to hand comb them all in the same direction. While I'm there I give a short sharp tug at any browning straps of foliage to see if they are ready to be detached and removed from the scene. Sometimes, if the foliage is looking horrid, I just clip it off about an inch high and take my chances.

Tough love. Some people make their drying daffodil leaves look more presentable by braiding them. That would not be me.

4. Avoid the whole problem of unsightly foliage by planting any number of dwarf bulbs. Their foliage is too small to be a problem later on. Examples are dwarf daffodils, dwarf iris, and some of the good scillas or squills. Everybody in the Pacific Northwest should plant some snowdrops.

5. Squirrels!!!! Infuriating little dumpster divers that they are. How do they know where your bulbs are planted? They are famous for digging up tulips and crocus, taking one bite out of each bulb and then spitting it out. My current theory— they can see signs of disturbed soil that are invisible to us. Applying fresh mulch over the whole bed should deter them in that case.

Squirrels don't like the taste of daffodils and one species of crocus, *Crocus tommasinianus* (or the tommies, as the Brits call them).

6. The species tommies bloom really, really early, which is nice, but they don't have much staying power, collapsing under the first hard rain. They make up for it by naturalizing, meaning they increase in number, eventually covering a large area. They also move around to other places in the yard including the lawn. How sweet is that! Sometimes they move by seed; other times those nutty squirrels dig them up and replant them. OC rodents with poor long-

PlantAmnesty ▲▲▲

term memories are just part of God's bigger plan to help plants get around.

7. Be forewarned some bulbs can become a nuisance in the PNW. Invasive bulbs are often region specific. I think they could probably be used in some tough places to good effect. Examples are: bluebells (*Scilla non-scripta*, now called *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*)— they are protected in England, but bemoaned in Seattle, grape hyacinth (*Muscari armeniacum*), *Arum italicum*, and Star of Bethlehem (*Ornithogalum umbelatum*).

8. Don't worry about the apparent early arrival of crocus. Their foliage comes up in the late fall, long before the flowers. Hmm, does that make them one of the naked ladies like Belladonna, Colchicum, and Spider Lily?

So, don't hesitate—get out there and plant your bulbs! Come spring, you will be glad you did.