Cornell University researchers have scientifically examined the art of successful bulb and perennial pairings. Professional landscape designers have long known perennials and spring-flowering bulbs such as tulips, narcissi and alliums make great companion plantings. Not only do the proper pairings look great together, they can be mutually supportive. For example, colorful spring bulbs can complement emerging perennial foliage — and when that foliage matures, it can mask the fading leaves of post-bloom bulbs.

For the most part, designers have relied on a practiced eye and experience to create combinations that spark spring magic. Now researchers at Cornell University have cast the objective eye of science on the issue. In a series of trials covering four seasons at the university’s Ithaca, NY, trial grounds (USDA Zone 5), the Cornell team put various pairings of bulbs and perennials to the test. Their results are now available to all online at Hort.Cornell.edu/combos.

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Cornell professor Dr. William B. Miller, who is director of the university’s Flower Bulb Research program, led the Cornell University team.

“The idea of pairing bulbs and perennials to achieve multiple goals is so desirable that we felt it deserved more than an anecdotal approach,” he says. “We created an objective study to document what works and what doesn’t in a typical spring garden.”

The combination trials were designed to achieve four goals:

1. Look at how early bulbs help extend the bloom season in the garden.
2. Explore how perennials might best be used to mask the dying foliage of post-bloom bulbs.
3. Consider leaf texture as a design element.
4. Examine the various roles color plays in creating successful combinations.

The Cornell scientists evaluated 15 plantings for their overall performance and benefits, and did not necessarily look for combinations that bloomed simultaneously. They focused on combinations that worked.

For the researchers’ tips on what makes a successful combination of bulb plantings, please see “5 Steps to Successful Combos” on page 32.

This article was contributed by the International Flower Bulb Centre. For more information about flower bulbs, visit bulb.com.

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Here are some spring garden tips from the Cornell team in Ithaca, NY, and the Netherlands Flower Bulb Information Center of Danby, VT:

1. **Plant bulbs that are likely to perennialize well in your area.** Some combo plantings are more successful than others. Sometimes the perennials come back, but the bulb flowers don’t. Most often, this occurs when the wrong bulbs are chosen for local climate or growing conditions. Other times, you may choose the right bulb type but a less durable variety.

2. **Consider each plant’s seasonal growth habits.** What looks good in the mind’s eye may not look as good in the early spring soil. This can happen when choosing companions based on their mature description without considering their springtime rate of growth and look at that time. In spring, different plants emerge and fill out in different ways, often featuring different coloring than later in the growing season. The goal of companion combos is to select perennials and bulbs that emerge together to work well in spring and early summer as partners. The Cornell project addresses this very subject.

3. **Consider mature plant size.** Unlike annuals, which normally grow large and flourish in a single season before dying away, perennials may take several seasons to gain maturity. If, for example, you are planning for a perennial to grow to a certain size in relation to your bulb planting, be sure to calculate when the perennial will reach that size. It may be necessary to plan for several bulb companions for your perennials over initial seasons, changing bulb choices as the perennials mature. Rather than a drawback, consider these as opportunities to play with bulbs as seasonal accessorizing.

4. **Plant just enough bulbs.** This might be considered the “Goldilocks” tip. Plant too few bulbs, and the look is sparse. Plant too many, and face overcrowding. Refer to bulb packaging, catalogs or websites for suggested spacing.

5. **Allow for perennial spread.** Different perennials have different growth habits. Some are aggressive growers with a tendency to spread. Others are late to leaf out and have a compact growth habit. For the aggressive spreaders, allow space for them to fill in. For more compact perennials, plant bulbs closer together. These considerations pay off when perennials’ late spring growth successfully hides bulb die-back after bloom.