

Planting Bulbs for Early Spring Color

By Dr. Helen C. Harrison

Bulbs bring the first hint of color to Wisconsin landscapes in early spring. Actually the term "bulb" is generic for underground buds with food storage capacities including true bulbs, corms, tubers, and rhizomes. For our purposes they will all be referred to as bulbs.

If you want to enjoy these perennials next spring, you must plan and plant now. Selecting a site or sites is one of the most important tasks facing you. Here the most important thing to remember is that bulbs don't like wet feet. A well-drained soil is a must; the ideal soil does not show any excess moisture five minutes after drenching.

Next, you need to select what varieties to plant. Here you have several factors to consider — hardiness, time of bloom, height, and color. Hardy bulbs are suggested for Wisconsin although we can grow tender ones if they are stored inside each winter. Common choices for hardy bulbs include the early flowering ones such as snowdrops, eranthis, miniature daffodils, crocus, Kaufmanniana and species tulips, and jonquils; the mid spring flowering ones like trumpet daffodils, muscari (grape-hyacinth), hyacinths, and Darwin hybrid tulips; and the late spring ones including wood hyacinths, lily-flowered tulips, and Dutch iris.

Bloom time can begin in Wisconsin as early as March and continue through May. However, many times this does not occur although you may have carefully selected for continuous bloom. Why? What happens when all your bulbs flower at the same time or within a couple of weeks of each other? Wisconsin springs are notorious for being "short-lived" or virtually non-existent — some years we literally go from winter to summer. When this occurs, most of your spring-flowering bulbs bloom all at once. So, the moral of the story is to be aware of making overly fine time distinctions when selecting your bulb varieties.

Height of the above mentioned

bulbs can range from 4 inches to 3 feet. As a rule, the bigger the bulb, the taller the plant and the larger the bloom.

Color selection is fairly expansive. Numerous colors exist in many different shades depending on species selection. However, tulip is the most versatile in this respect. Depend on hyacinths and muscari for blue and narcissus for yellow.

The next step is to purchase the bulbs. Select bulbs that are firm to the touch and are not scarred or deeply bruised. Avoid bulbs that have an unpleasant odor or blue mold. However, do not be concerned if the papery skin is peeled off or if the white flesh has a slight brownish cast.

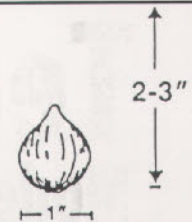
The price you pay for your bulbs depends primarily on bulb type and size. For example, usually hyacinth bulbs are more expensive than tulips and daffodils are more expensive than crocus. Of course, varieties within each genus also determine price. Bulb size also deserves some explanation. Generally the larger the bulb, the more expensive and desirable it is. However, for golf courses and other mass outdoor plantings, you do not need the absolute largest bulb available — these produce large flowers which are usually too fragile to withstand strong winds or heavy rains. The following table taken from **How to Grow a Miracle** by Gustave Springer gives you some idea of the number of bulbs to buy based on bed and bulb size.

Bulbs	# Bulbs Needed/	
	6 Sq. Ft. Bed	Sq. Ft.
Tulip 12 cm*	30	5
11 cm	36	6
Hyacinth 16 cm	24	4
15 cm	30	5
Crocus 8 cm	54	9
Muscari 9 cm	54	9
Narcissus	18	3
Dutch Iris	36	6

*2.5 cm. = 1 inch, bulb diameter

Spring flowering bulbs can be planted in Wisconsin from mid-September through early November (in the southern part of the state). Plant as early as possible to allow the bulbs more time to develop a good root system before winter arrives; don't plant after heavy frosts have occurred. A healthy root system means a larger, healthier bulb and flower show next spring.

Prepare the top 8 to 10 inches of soil at your planting site. Mix the topsoil with an organic material such as peat moss, aged manure, or compost to condition the soil. Add a fertilizer high in phosphorus such as bone meal to promote root and bulb development. About ¼ lb. or ½ cup is sufficient for a small area of about 12 or 13 sq. feet. When spring arrives and the bulbs germinate, another dose of fertilizer such as 10-10-10 should be added.



Bulb planting depth

Bulb size determines both bulb spacing and planting depth. A general rule of thumb is to plant bulbs at a depth two to three times the diameter of the bulb. For example, if a bulb is 1" in diameter, it should be planted 2" to 3" deep.



Bulb spacing

Space the bulbs at least one bulb diameter apart. For example, 1" diameter bulbs should be spaced a minimum of 1" apart. If you plant the bulbs too close together, they'll crowd each other out. However, if you plant them too far apart, the flower display will be sparse and ineffective.

After the ground freezes, apply a 2" to 4" layer of mulch to help prevent heaving injury caused by alternate freezing and thawing throughout the winter months. Straw, marsh hay, or evergreen branches are all good choices for a winter mulch. Remove the mulch as soon as green leaves come through in the spring.

Bulbs can provide a welcome splash of color to your golf course in early spring. Be sure to select types that will be in bloom when your course is open (some of the early ones may bloom too early for your needs) and plant in mass for the most dramatic effect. This planting should preferably be a minimum of 15 to 20 bulbs, all the same color.