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TIPS FOR BULB & PERENNIAL COMBOS



Bulbs ready for fall planting.

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:

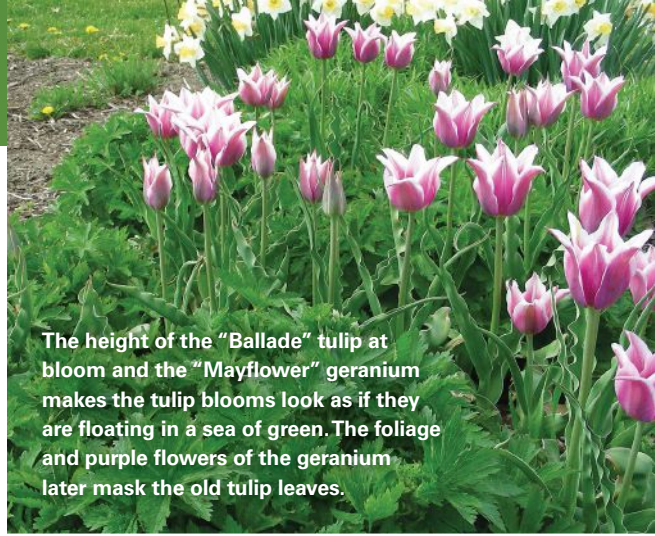
1. Look at how early bulbs help extend the bloom season in the garden.
2. Explore how perennials might best be

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.



The height of the "Ballade" tulip at bloom and the "Mayflower" geranium makes the tulip blooms look as if they are floating in a sea of green. The foliage and purple flowers of the geranium later mask the old tulip leaves.

WEB EXTRA

For all 15 combinations, visit www.landscapemanagement.net/Cornellbulb-research

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

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This combination shows contrasting foliage texture, simultaneous blooming, and perennial foliage cover.

5 STEPS TO SUCCESSFUL COMBOS

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.

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King of the mountain

Initially released with the Novalis "Plants that Work" group in 2010, *Carex oshimensis* Everest is available in 2011 nationwide from **Tesselaar**. With its bright-white margins and architectural, linear foliage, the Japanese sedge can work as a container and patio plant or as a filler with bedding and specimen plants. It loves shade, and its low-growing, easily controlled, mounding shape softly edges any border or bed. Its ability to fill in an area while still behaving itself, also makes it useful as a groundcover. Tesselaar.com



Deep purple

Echinacea purpurea PowWow Wild Berry features vivid rose-purple, 3- to 4-in. flowers that retain color longer than other coneflowers. Hardy to Zone 3, **Ball's** first-year-flowering perennial has a basal branching habit, resulting in more flowers per plant. Reaching a height of 20 to 24 in. in the full-sun garden, it blooms continually without deadheading. It's an intermediate day-length flowering variety, with most rapid and uniform flowering at 14 hours. BallLandscape.com

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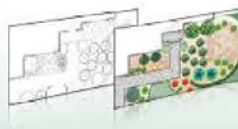
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Sweet potato cutie

Ipomoea Bright Ideas is bred by **Floranova**, and its plants are heat-tolerant and very compact. Distributed in the US by Oro Farms, the series' colors include black, lime and Rusty Red (pictured). Growing 6 in. tall to a spread of 12 in., it works well in combination planters and flowerbeds. OroFarms.com



Performance diva

In early spring, the leaves of *Abelia* Kaleidoscope emerge on bright-red stems with lime-green centers and bright-yellow edges. When summer arrives, the yellow matures to golden and the variegation does not burn or scorch, according to the company. In fall and winter, the foliage color deepens to shades of orange and fiery red. This mounded, tightly branched shrub stays under 3 ft. tall and about as wide. Reported by **PlantHaven** to be the longest-blooming of all the *Abelias*, by late spring Kaleidoscope is covered with soft pink buds that open to white blooms that keep coming well into autumn. AbeliaKaleidoscope.com