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SPRING BULBS

Many gardeners will have their thoughts on planting spring bulbs as the garden shops are brimming with great selections of most types at this time.

The desire to have a range of spring flowering bulbs coming into their own in early to mid spring is not only a great sight but they also represent the beginning of a new growing season.

Many spring bulbs require a chilling of about 4 degrees Celsius for about 2 months to obtain the best blooms.

For instance: Tulips need 14 weeks of chilling; Hyacinths need 12 weeks of chilling; Crocus need 4 weeks of chilling; Snowdrops and scilla need 6 weeks of chilling; Grape hyacinths need 12 weeks of chilling.

This is why those living in colder climates such as the lower South Island will, with no effort on their behalf, have the very best displays.

If you live in a warmer climate where there are no hard frosts you may need to place your spring bulbs in the fridge for a few weeks prior to planting.

Planting should be done before the first hard frost in cooler areas and after the bulbs have done their time in the fridge in warmer areas.

The chilling is what the bulbs need to produce the flower spike.

I sometimes have the complaint from gardeners in warmer areas that their bulbs grew and produced foliage but did not flower, non chilling was the problem.

Spring bulbs can be planted in a sunny, open ground situation or in containers. The size of the container will depend on the type of bulb and the number of them you wish to plant.

Bulbs prefer full sun, a rich, well-draining soil to which compost or other organic matter has been added. The soil should be cultivated and loosened to a depth of at least 6 to 8 inches. Either dig a trench for a bed planting or individual holes for individual bulbs or small clusters. Plant the bulbs by placing them into position. (Never push or force the bulb into the soil).

Check the bulb package to determine the spacing and planting depth for your type of bulb. As a general rule of thumb, bulbs should be planted twice as deep as they are high. (Larger daffodil bulbs should be planted at a depth three times their height) The larger the bulbs are, the more space they will need between them.

Cover the bulbs lightly with soil and then sprinkle a good bulb food on top of the soil, not in the hole. Fertilizer in the hole may burn tender, young roots. Water thoroughly, and then keep the soil moist to allow the roots to form more quickly.

If you prefer to use a more natural food then a small amount of **BioPhos** and sheep manure pellets can be used. This natural food can be worked into the soil below where the bulbs are to be planted.

Nice big fat bulbs will have all the energy they need to produce both foliage and flower, so in a sense they do not require any additional food to perform.

The addition of food is used to restore the energy of the bulb after it has performed along with ample sunlight on the foliage.

The foliage is the collector of energy from the sun and this is why the foliage should

never be cut or removed after flowering, instead it is left to do its job until it naturally dies off.

Failure to allow this will likely mean that the bulb will not perform again next season. Summer temperatures along with warm to hot soil can cook bulbs and they will be lost forever.

This is why we should lift most bulbs after they have become dormant and before the soil temperatures rise too much.

Exceptions to this are bulbs that can be naturalized; these include crocus, iris reticulata, grape hyacinth, daffodils and bluebells can be grown right in the lawn. Choose an area where the grass can be left unmowed until the foliage has matured. Hillsides and the perimeter of wooded areas are also excellent areas for naturalizing.

Freesias can also be left in garden plots to multiply and flower each spring.

Generally, the earliest flowers which open will be the Crocus and Snowdrops followed by Daffodils and Tulips. Before the spring bulb season is over, the Dutch Iris and Spanish Bluebells will grace your garden. Within each of these groups, and all of the other spring bloomers, you will find a multitude of hybrids which bloom at different times (i.e. early spring, mid spring & late spring). Use these hybrids to spread out the bloom time for each group, and you can enjoy each species for a much longer time.

When your spring bulbs will actually flower will depend a lot on the season and if by chance it turns out to be a warmish winter then without the chilling you may not have any flowers at all, just foliage.

Daffodils and other spring bulbs that are naturalized should be lifted every few years when dormant to break up the clumps. When you do this you will end up with masses of bulbs of various sizes from mature large flowering ones down to bulblets. The larger ones can be replanted in the autumn and the others either placed in a nursery bed or discarded. If you are growing any spring bulbs in containers then these should be lifted when the foliage has died back because they will need fresh mix when replanted in the autumn and being in containers they could cook in the summer.

To force bulbs to flower in pots indoors the following should be applied. (From the internet)

The pot should be filled to one-half to three-quarters full with potting mix and then moistened. Gently press the bulbs into the soil with the broad base down, and the nose pointed up. They should be arranged as close together as possible without touching each other or the pot. Face the flat side of tulip bulbs toward the outside of the pot. Barely cover the bulbs with additional potting mix and water gently until the soil is thoroughly moistened. Add a little more soil if settling has exposed the bulb.

Now the pot must be placed in a dark, cool area for 12 weeks or longer. The temperature must remain below 48 degrees F. but above freezing (35-40 degrees is recommended).

While total darkness is best, if you are chilling the bulbs in the refrigerator, don't worry about the light coming on when you open the door.

Once the roots begin growing out of the drainage holes in the pots or the shoots start to grow (about twelve weeks), give the bulbs a gradual transition to warm. Don't expose them to warm temperatures too soon or the blooms will emerge too fast and will fail before they ever open. Start them out in the coolest spot of your home and gradually move them to warmer areas. This will make the flowers last much longer. Don't expose pale or white foliage to full sun until it has 'greened' up in a few days. Rotate the pots

one-quarter turn every few days to keep the foliage and stems upright. Keep the soil moist, but never soggy.

Once the bulbs have finished flowering, remove the spent flowers and stems but continue to keep watering and providing light for the foliage. The bulbs can be planted outside when the weather permits just as with any perennial. Do not remove the foliage until it has turned yellow. Unfortunately, forcing takes a lot out of a bulb so it may not bloom again for many seasons. The bulbs should never be forced a second time, always start with "new" bulbs.

Problems ring me at 0800 466464 (Palmerston North 3570606)