

DIG THIS By Peg Tillery (for 10-29-03) , ©2005

This is the perfect time of year to snatch up bags and bags of bulbs and start planting for tantalizing and delightful early spring color. Try species tulips this year instead of the hybridized varieties. Species tulips are smaller and shorter but they'll return year after year. You'll find them in red, white, yellow, nearly orange, both in solids and stripes. Many local nurseries carry bags of bulbs plus single bulbs for mixing and matching. Costco has a plethora of bags of bulbs each year. When selecting bulbs make sure they're firm and the outer layers are intact.

Some gardeners love using those open cone shaped bulb diggers. Other gardeners dig holes with an electric auger (it works like a drill). I usually dig out a big circle and scatter the bulbs randomly in bunches. The general rule of planting bulbs is to cover the bulbs with soil three to four times as deep as the bulb is fat. Some instructions say cover bulbs three to four times the bulbs height. Most bulb packages show a diagram. If you've had trouble with critters digging up your bulbs, you might want to try lining the hole with chicken wire or planting the bulbs in a chicken wire cage. You won't see the cage once the bulbs are covered with soil, but the critters won't like trying to wend their way or dig through the wire.

Remember to save bulbs to force indoors, adding a hint of spring to the depths of winter. Especially try Hyacinth or Narcissus. Both will perfume a room. Steve Smith of Sunnyside Nursery on the East Side recommends growing narcissus for several weeks in a dark closet or cupboard. This method helps keep the blossom bedecked stems from flopping over.

When forcing bulbs indoors it's important to replicate their outdoor growing conditions. This means the bulbs must be refrigerated for several weeks to chill them to start on their way to manufacturing leaves, stems, and ultimately flowers. Tulip and daffodil bulbs can be planted in containers with several inches of potting soil in the bottom of the pot. Then place the bulbs with the flat side down and the pointed side facing up. Cover the bulbs with potting soil (anywhere from four to eight inches depending on the size of the container). Water the bulbs in and place in a dark place for about two weeks (until the stem points start to emerge). Bring the pots out into a well-lit spot and water once a week. Watch the bulbs grow and especially enjoy the flowers. You can start several pots of bulbs throughout the winter, spacing each group of plantings two or four weeks apart.

Bulbs grown in potting soil can be planted out in your garden after they've finished blooming inside. Acclimate them to the much colder conditions first though. First put them out on a covered porch (or in the garage) for several days, then move them outside in a sheltered spot and finally plant them in the ground. You can also store the pots of spent bulbs in your garage and let the foliage die back and wait until spring warms up and then plant the bulbs outside in the ground. The winter weather or procrastination (if you're like me) will determine which method you choose.

Narcissus and Hyacinth bulbs are great choices for novice or carefree gardeners. You can grow these bulbs on a layer of water covering a bed of marbles, pebbles or decorative stone. In fact, you don't even need the ornamental pieces. Many vases have a neck where the bulbs fit just perfectly and the vase is first filled with water until it touches the bottom of the bulb nesting in the neck. Put the bulbs in containers in a dark place for a week or two until the bulb begins to grow. Try groupings of pots, vases or a combination of the two on kitchen and powder room counters, windowsills, anywhere your imagination takes you.

Bulbs grown this way will spend all their energy so you'll want to throw them in your compost pile or into the trash when they're finished blooming. If you've grown your Paperwhites in a pot with soil you might be tempted to plant them outside later, but Paperwhite Narcissus do not rebloom here. They're not suited to our climate and rainy weather. You could always experiment though and try your luck at getting them to grow here. If you succeed, please let me know.

Contact Peg in care of this newspaper or email ptillery@co.kitsap.wa.us or gardenmentor@yahoo.com