

## Tubs of Color: Spring-flowering Bulbs



Tulip

Who says bulbs can only be grown "in the ground?" For those that have limited ground resources or unlimited container choices, container gardening with bulbs can go a long way to provide color in the landscape, balcony or deck. Another wonderful advantage to

container gardening is its accessibility for the physically challenged.

### Picking the Best Site

It's wise to think about where you would like to have planters of bulbs before you do all the work of buying containers, bulbs, etc. Here are a few requirements to consider:

- ❖ Put containers in a sun/partial sun location. Do not place them in dense shady areas. Not only will your bulbs not enjoy it, you may not either, if it's too far from view.

- ❖ It's best to keep the size of the planter in scale with the chosen area.



Hyacinth

### Choosing the Right Container

Choosing a suitable container can be lots of fun. Traditional containers, like wooden whiskey barrels,

can be found in local garden centers and nurseries. For more unusual containers, consider wooden wheelbarrows and milk crates. Your next visit to a garage sale or flea market may provide you with some interesting options for planting. Another way to be original is to build your own! One key point to consider is drainage. Be sure to drill several holes or somehow provide a water outlet or bulbs will rot.

Whiskey barrels have a proven track record; they are inexpensive, permanent containers that have enough soil volume to safely overwinter planted bulbs. The large container allows you to plant a number of different types of bulbs that bloom at different times, providing color for longer periods in the spring.

If theft is a problem, the larger containers may prove to be too heavy to just "walk away." Heavy containers may not be suitable for some balconies or decks if adequate support is not provided. Wooden containers when filled with wet soil could be too heavy for some structures to support.

A word of caution: be careful if you are attempting this with terra cotta, clay or other pots that are not frost-proof. Many of these types of pots will not withstand winter's freezing temperatures causing them to crack and fall apart.



Narcissus, daffodil



Anemone blanda--Windflower

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### Bulb Buying Tips

Buying bulbs is like a visit to the candy store--the choices are endless and each one is prettier than the last. There are numerous varieties available through mail order catalogs, nurseries and garden centers. Before you buy, there are several things to consider:



Crocus

- ❖ Make sure you buy from a reputable firm.
- ❖ Purchase bulbs that are firm, not soft and rotted.
- ❖ Try to plant as soon as you can. If not, it's best to store bulbs in a cool, well-ventilated location until you can do so.
- ❖ If you need to store bulbs for a period of time, inspect them periodically and throw out any that show signs of rotting.

### Best Bulbs for Containers



Miniature Iris

Personal preference goes a long way in deciding what bulbs to plant. A few helpful hints to keep in mind when forming a plant list: color, height and bloom time. For some, fragrance is an important selection consideration. Decide what you want in your planters before you buy. If you want planters of pink tulips, then buy

only pink tulips. If you want a sequence of blooms, then there is some homework to do. If a sequence of bloom is properly done, you can enjoy weeks of bloom and color.

Be certain to select bulbs that are hardy in your area. Catalogs and plant tags should prove helpful in providing this information. The following spring-blooming bulbs perform well in containers:

- ❖ *Anemone blanda*--Windflower
- ❖ *Chionodoxa*---Glory of the Snow
- ❖ Crocus--all species and Dutch crocus cultivars
- ❖ *Galanthus*--Snowdrop
- ❖ Hyacinth
- ❖ Miniature Iris---*Iris danfordiae*, *Iris reticulata*
- ❖ *Muscari*--Grape hyacinth
- ❖ *Narcissus*, daffodil
- ❖ *Puschkinia*
- ❖ Tulip



*Muscari*--Grape hyacinth

### Putting it All Together

Now that you have selected a site, container and bulbs for planting, it's time to put it all together. For larger planters like whiskey barrels, it's best to permanently place the planter before you start. Once it's filled with soil and bulbs, it can be difficult to move.

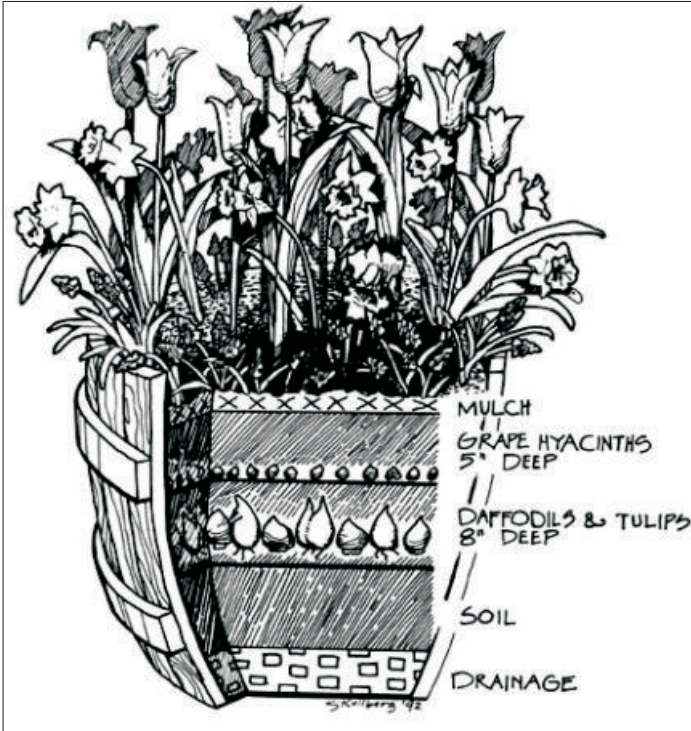


*Galanthus*--Snowdrop

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The Netherlands Flower Bulb Information Center refers to the container planting process as "double-decker layers." The double-decker planting method is similar to making lasagna: Build by adding layers. First put in a foundation of drainage material like gravel, and then add a layer of soil. Eight inches from the top of the container, add a layer of large flowering type bulbs like tulips and daffodils. Add three inches of soil. At five inches deep, add your smaller bulbs, like grape hyacinth.

Here's a helpful hint when planting in containers--over plant slightly, with bulbs touching each other, but not the sides of the container. Cover with three to four inches of soil and then mulch. Be sure to water thoroughly.



*Chionodoxa*---Glory of the Snow

### Overwintering

Cover whiskey barrels and containers with layers of leaves and pine needles to insulate against freezing and thawing. Apply this "insulation" after the ground freezes. This treatment should be adequate to get them through the winter. Remember to only use bulbs that are hardy in your area!

### After the Bloom

After the last of the spring blooms have faded, replant with various annuals for the summer growing season. You have two options when planting your containers: Carefully remove the bulbs from the soil, allowing the foliage to mature before storing them for replanting in the fall.

If space in the container permits, interplant with summer blooming annuals, leaving the bulbs in place. A word of caution - be careful not to damage bulbs when interplanting. In many cases, bulbs can be carried over year after year, if properly done.

Photo images and line drawing courtesy of The Netherlands Flower Bulb Information Center.

### About Your Expert

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PlantAmerica Horticulturist Donna Moramarco (a.k.a. "Donna in the Garden") has been helping gardeners solve problems and achieve their dreams for over two decades. Donna has degrees in horticulture and education plus over 20 years as a Cornell University extension horticulturist.