

Bulbs for Planting in Drifts

Bulbs are an excellent choice for gardeners wanting to extend the season of interest in their borders, liven up a patch of rough grass or create a carpet of colour underneath trees and shrubs. Many bulbs are inexpensive if bought in bulk and will repay careful planting and aftercare for many years.

The display of crocuses on The Stray in Harrogate is now a major attraction and whilst Skipton might lack the extensive grass areas of our neighbour, there are numerous sites that will benefit from a few daffodils and crocuses. Skipton in Bloom plans to plant bulbs around the town for maximum impact over the coming years and hope locals and visitors will appreciate these cheerful harbingers of spring. Craven College is also planting areas with snowdrops, crocuses, daffodils, tulips, camassias and alliums to create successional colour in meadow areas on the campus. The project is inspired by a grass verge planted at my home which now boasts colour from January to May and again in the autumn.



Snowdrops on a roadside verge

The majority of bulbous plants (including true bulbs, corms and tubers) are planted as dry bulbs whilst dormant in the autumn, this would include some of our best-known bulbs such as narcissi, tulips and hyacinths. The bulbs should be healthy, without obvious signs of mould and an intact tunic. Others such as dogs-tooth violets, trilliums and wood anemones can also be planted in the autumn but are less resistant to drying out. These bulbs should be bought only if damp packed in peat or similar material and the bulbs are plump and firm, not dry and shrivelled.

Snowdrops, snowflakes and aconites are also very prone to drying out and tend to be sold 'in the green', which involves lifting the bulbs as growing plants usually after flowering during the spring. Summer flowering and half-hardy bulbs are also planted in the spring and may benefit from being started in pots before transplanting into the garden. Pot grown bulbs such as lilies are useful fillers for borders in need of temporary colour, pots may be sunk into the ground or hidden amongst the foliage of other plants.

Many bulbs can be bought pot-grown, they are more expensive however and may need replanting deeper once they have died down. Cyclamen generally establish better as pot grown plants and like snowdrops and aconites rarely establish if planted as dry, dormant bulbs in the autumn.

Most bulbs are typically planted 2-3 times deeper than the length of the bulb, exceptions include cyclamen most of which should be shallowly planted and dogs-tooth violets that need to be deeply planted. The addition of grit or sharp sand at planting can benefit many bulbs that require well-drained conditions. Many types of tulips and hyacinths make excellent spring bedding plants in formal borders, whilst daffodils, crocuses and snowdrops are excellent for planting in naturalistic drifts. Skipton in Bloom planted nearly 15,000 bulbs in drifts on The Bailey during 2009. Volunteers were given instructions for planting and a record made of those areas planted so that future plantings do not spoil earlier ones.

Bulb Selection and Planting

1. Bulbs should be selected carefully ensuring no sign of disease is visible and that the bulb tunic is intact. Keep different varieties separate since rogues in drifts can spoil the effect. It is better to work as a group on one drift before moving on to the next. Use canes to temporarily mark which areas have been planted.
2. Generally groups of the same species or cultivar look best massed together or in association with a few other distinct species or cultivars. Here we will be planting sweeping drifts of single variety daffodils, whilst the crocus will be planted as mixed drifts but in small clumps of the same variety.
3. Natural planting of drifts in grass or borders require careful placement of bulbs to prevent the resulting drifts being too uniform. Traditionally a handful of bulbs are rolled onto the plating area and planted where they land however you can lose the bulbs or stand on them. It is better to mark out a small area to be planted (within your drift) and work across planting clumps of different group sizes at irregular intervals.



Planting on The Bailey



Daffodils at Craven College

4. Bulbs can be planted individually with a trowel or bulb planter or in groups by digging a larger hole (remove or roll back turf before digging if necessary). Improve soil and mix in a slow-release fertilizer if required.
5. Plant bulbs usually 2-3 times deeper than the height of the bulb (deeper in sandy soils) making sure they are planted the right way up (not always easy to determine).
6. A low nitrogen/high potash feed may benefit many bulbs if applied after flowering.

7. Leave bulbs to die down naturally, do not remove or tie up leaves until after they turn yellow/brown. If planted in grass do not mow until 6-8 weeks after the last bulb has flowered. Later bulbs that die down more quickly after flowering e.g. alliums can be planted to extend the flowering period.
8. Large, tightly-packed clumps of bulbs will often benefit from periodic lifting and thinning.

Bulbs planted by Skipton in Bloom - Autumn 2009

Name	No	Description
<i>Crocus</i> 'Golden Yellow'	500	Buttercup-yellow
<i>Crocus vernus</i> 'Flower Record'	250	Pale violet
<i>Crocus vernus</i> 'Grand Maitre'	250	Mauve purple
<i>Crocus vernus</i> 'Jeanne d'Arc'	250	White
<i>Crocus vernus</i> 'King of the Striped'	250	Amethyst violet and paler stripes
<i>Crocus vernus</i> 'Negro Boy'	250	Dark purple
<i>Crocus vernus</i> 'Pickwick'	250	White striped pale and dark lilac
<i>Crocus vernus</i> 'Queen of the Blues'	250	Lilac blue
<i>Crocus vernus</i> 'Remembrance'	250	Shiny purple
Total	2500	
<i>Narcissus</i> 'Carlton'	2500	Yellow, large cup, early, 18"
<i>Narcissus</i> 'Golden Harvest'	1500	Large yellow trumpet, early, 18"
<i>Narcissus</i> 'Ice Follies'	1000	White, pale yellow cup, early, 14"
<i>Narcissus</i> 'King Alfred'	2500	Golden yellow, mid season, 14"
<i>Narcissus</i> 'Mount Hood'	1000	White trumpet, late, 16"
<i>Narcissus pseudonarcissus obvallaris</i>	500	Golden yellow, early, 8"
<i>Narcissus</i> 'Rijnvelds Early Sensation'	2000	Golden yellow trumpet, very early, 18-20"
<i>Narcissus</i> 'W.P. Milner'	1000	Cream with white trumpet, early, 8"
Total	12000	

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