Bulbs for Bountiful Spring Blooms

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There’s nothing like the bright blooms of spring bulbs to wake us up after a long, soggy winter’s slumber. They may not last very long, but the cheery faces of the likes of daffodils, crocus, and tulips are a welcome sight after the many gray days we slog through here in Portland. And nothing could be easier to grow!

Most spring-blooming bulbs require a cold treatment before they can wake up and make flowers. For this reason, we must plant them in the fall. Bulbs usually appear in garden centers in late summer, and are best planted through November.

There are a few general rules of thumb for growing great bulbs:

1. Drainage is key. Add lots of compost to your bulb bed to get the soil energized and to break up compacted clay. Tulips in particular are sensitive to heavy soils. Adding a handful of pumice to the planting hole will increase drainage even more.
2. Bulbs love phosphorus. Bone meal is the traditional fertilizer, but adding a blended organic bulb food at planting time (or in fall to an established bed) is a great choice, as it provides many micronutrients.
3. How deep do I plant? About 3x deep as the bulb is big. For little bulbs like crocus, that’s about 3 inches. For big daffodils, 6-8”. When in doubt, go deeper.
4. In general, the bulbs go in pointy side up.

The earliest-blooming bulbs are snowdrops and crocus, which usually show up in January. It’s not uncommon to see them coming up through snow (when we have it). So charming! Crocus usually come in shades of purple, but also yellow and white. Snowdrops are white and dainty.

Next in line are the early-blooming Narcissus (daffodils). The large ‘King Alfred’, ‘February Gold’, or other trumpet-style varieties are earliest, usually blooming in February, followed by jonquils like ‘Tête-à-Tête’ or ‘Jetfire’. If you plan it right, you can have a steady stream of many styles of daffodils blooming through May. Look for bloom times listed on the bulb packages.

Tulips also come in early, mid, and late-blooming varieties. Most tulips are not particularly long-lived, so you may want to do a new planting every 2 years for the best show. The exception are what are called “species” tulips, which are typically shorter-growing, often produce multiple blooms per stem, and spread over time. Look for those labeled as “species” or *Tulipa*.

There are many other interesting and unusual bulbs that are just as easy to grow as the old standbys. Dutch Irises, tiny and intensely blue and purple, are a fine addition to the early spring garden. Jewel-toned Anemones and Ranunculus are wonderful cut flowers, and can quickly colonize an area, as long as drainage is good. And check out the many unusual Fritillarias, such as blazing orange Crown Imperials, or checkered “snakes-heads”. And don’t forget Hyacinth and Muscari for their delightful perfume.

Happy planting! We’re already looking forward to spring, aren’t we?!