

LAYERING BULBS

DOES YOUR GARDEN LACK COLOUR DURING JULY AND AUGUST? Well here's an idea: why not plant some bulbs? Sure, we tend to think of bulbs as spring bloomers: old faithfuls such as crocuses, tulips and daffodils. But there are different types of bulbs that bloom for most of the summer, and by careful selection and strategic planting you can have a display of bloom from early spring until well into August.

For a continuous display of colour the secret is to layer the bulbs, with the late bloomers at the bottom and the earliest bloomers at the top. There are basically four main "layers" of bulbs that work particularly well for this method of planting: 1. Lillium (including the Asiatics, Trumpets and Orientals); 2. Narcissi and Allium; 3. Tulips; 4. Muscari, Scilla, Iris reticulata, and Crocus.

Within a layer you can vary the bulbs, putting 2-3 Asiatic lilies with a couple of Oriental ones, thus extending the final blooming time. Early and late blooming tulips also work well this way. How many bulbs you will need depends on the size of the area you want to plant, but remember that most bulbs will form offsets and will need dividing sooner if planted too close together.

The first step is to find a bare spot between perennials during the summer – about now. Come bulb planting season, though, it can be hard to recall where the perennials of summer were, so a little advance planning can help. The goal is to have something in bloom from the first crocus of spring through June alliums and August oriental lilies, so the spot really does have to be empty.

Now dig a hole at least 12" to 14" deep and as wide as the space you want to fill. Mix the soil with a good quantity of compost and a couple handfuls of bonemeal, and set aside. Put 2" to 3" of coarse sand in the bottom of the hole to provide good drainage for the bulbs, then add another 2" to 3" of the soil mixture.

Now you can start to plant. Lilies go in the deepest. You might fit four, six or even more in the hole, depending on their size and that of the hole. They bloom last, from late June for the Asiatics, July for the Trumpets to August for the Orientals. Cover with about 2" of the soil mix.

Next plant daffodils and alliums. Basically you try to fit them in around the bulbs below but don't worry too much as they will find their way to the surface around other bulbs planted above them. Again cover with 2" of good soil. Continue with tulips and soil and finally the smallest bulbs that are also the earliest blooming, and cover with the last of the soil.

In the Spring, after the blooms have faded, be sure to let the foliage die back on its own as this is how bulbs replenish themselves for next year's flowers.

Don't worry that bulbs like tulips might be planted a little deeper than they would be if you just planted them on their own. The extra coverage will provide better protection from any freeze-thaw problems in winter and the worst that will happen is they might bloom a week later than your neighbour's tulips. You'll already have enjoyed the first crocus of spring and the same spot will continue to provide beautiful blooms right through the summer.