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GARDEN NOTES

SPRING HOPES ETERNAL WITH BULBS

By Dennis Hinkamp

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As fall turns to winter and the specter of Y2K clouds your optimism, take a leap of faith and plant some bulbs now. Your almost heavenly reward will come next spring.

Many of us have good intentions when it comes to planting bulbs, says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. Each spring, as we notice all the neighbors' blossoms ridiculing our flowerless landscape, we renew our commitment to plant more bulbs in the fall. But, sometimes that handful of bulbs we finally get planted just doesn't seem to make much of a difference.

It often seems like we need to buy a truckload of bulbs to make any impact in our landscape, he says. This is both expensive and fills up the garage when we forget to plant them. There are other less expensive options that produce beautiful results. This fall, try naturalizing an area with bulbs in the landscape.

That spring meadow of your dreams covered with random color and plants is considered to be naturalized, Goodspeed says. Too often we think our bulbs have to be planted in a formal garden setting. That is fine for large formal gardens, but most home landscapes are better suited for a more natural, random planting of bulbs and flowers.

The first step to naturalizing an area is selecting the site, he explains. It can be as small as a 10 x 10 garden bed, or as large as the entire backyard.

"When I was growing up, we had a small patch of daffodils and narcissus that grew in the front lawn. Each spring the bulbs bloomed, adding welcome color and beauty to the landscape. We only mowed this area after the bulbs had begun to die back. I loved it."

A friend in Roy planted crocus in his parking strip, creating a beautiful show each spring, he adds. "The flowers bloom up through the grass, adding color to an otherwise drab area. Of course, the area can not be mowed until after the foliage begins to die back."

A naturalized area does not have to be located in the lawn, Goodspeed says. A shrub and tree bed or an informal perennial bed work well, too. The area should have good drainage so the bulbs can remain healthy. Raised areas or slopes make great naturalizing areas. The area should also be fairly permanent so the bulbs can remain undisturbed for many years.

To promote a feeling of nature in the area, plant the bulbs randomly, he says. Mother Nature does not use rows or symmetrical planting. In large areas, toss the bulbs out, then plant them where they land. Keep a few bulbs to plant in clusters which are mostly one color or variety, adding an occasional different-colored bulb for interest in the cluster.

When using small bulbs, plant them by paths or the sidewalk so they do not get lost in the rest of the bulbs, he adds. A few can be thrown in with the other bulbs, but most need to be put randomly in highly visible areas.

"If you can only afford a few bulbs each year, start with a small area and gradually expand in the future," Goodspeed says. A small spot with lots of color is much more eye-catching than a large area with a bulb every 10 or 20 feet. Keep the color focused.

Some bulbs naturalize better than others, Goodspeed warns. The most common bulbs to try are daffodils, narcissus and crocus. They come in a variety of colors and sizes. Others to consider include the drumstick allium (Allium sphaerocephalon), Asiatic lilies, galanthus (Galanthus nivalis), and, if you are brave, the muscari. All naturalize quite well, are long lived, and add enough color to the landscape to provide a restful nights sleep.

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