

Words and Photographs by Anne McKeon

Green

It is that time of year again bulb planting time has arrived. By combining different types of bulbs together it is possible, they say, to create 100 days of continuous colour. These bulbs can be planted in the ground or into pots. It's your choice. Snowdrops and Winter Aconites, for example, appear as a rule in January, followed by Daffodils, Crocus, Tulips and so on and ending with Alliums in late June.

Fingers

Egyptian religious paintings and from the 5th century the flower of the Iris was also adopted as the emblem of the French kings. I have also been fascinated by the Romans and am in awe of their talents. Among many things that they can be credited with, the Romans brought the snowdrop to Britain. To this day many UK growers welcome the first snowdrops of the season by holding Snowdrop Parties in order to welcome the arrival of the snowdrops and to discuss their beauty with fellow enthusiasts. A gardener's alternative to a Tupperware Party. My own personal favourite, the narcissus (daffodil), is a native of Western Europe. It has been grown since the Middle Ages.

Buy flower bulbs as early in the season as possible as it is then that the best quality is available. Bulbs that remain in shops unsold for a while tend to get handled frequently by undecided customers and by young little hands. Reject bulbs of poor quality as these tend to produce poor quality plants. A good quality bulb has a firm neck, a clean firm surface with the base also firm and free from rot.

Plant bulbs as soon as possible after purchase. By the way, spring flowering bulbs such as daffodils, crocus, snowdrops etc should be planted from September to November. The nearer to late November the better for the planting of tulips. If bulbs have to be stored prior to planting, they should be stored in a dry, airy place. Bulbs should be planted into the ground to their own depth and a half. eg. If your bulb is 2 inches in depth plant it 2 inches plus 1 inch into the ground (ie. One and half time



Hyacinths, tulips & daffodils. – Plant now for spring colour

For those of you that are interested in quiz trivia or are just simply curious minded, did you know that the hyacinth came from Turkey a few years before the tulip? The lily was painted on the walls of palaces in Crete over 3,000 years ago and the Greeks and Christians associated the lily with purity. The flower of the Iris, it is said, appeared in Indian and

the depth of the bulb). Many people plant their bulbs much too deeply and wonder why they do not grow and flower for them. They wait eagerly for some sign of life to appear above ground. My guess is that if they are planted too deeply they will flower alright but probably in Melbourne and most definitely not on this continent. On the other hand, bulbs that are thrown at the soil and that are barely covered will hardly flower in situ either as the waiting crows will fly off with them once you have turned your back. A trick when planting would be to push the bulb into the soil and then turn it clockwise thus locking the bulb into the ground and making it more difficult (but not impossible) for the birds to pull them out. Care when planting will result in a good return of flowers.

Most bulbs require free draining soil. It stands to reason that if they are going to spend much of their lives underground they will not be happy if up to their necks in water. Add coarse sand to heavy soils. never add fresh manure. if you are planting bulbs into containers rather than into the open ground make sure that the drainage holes are not blocked.

Bulbs demand very little attention (though some is necessary) and so are ideal for both the avid gardener and the less enthusiastic planter. There are no hard and fast rules regarding the feeding of bulbs. With poor soils, however, it is beneficial to dig in fertiliser before planting. If feeding is required while bulbs are growing I would suggest that you feed with a liquid fertiliser. Bulbs in containers generally require feeding once the food supply in the compost has been exhausted. ie. more frequently than bulbs growing in the open ground. Summer flowering bulbs require watering during drought spells. Water thoroughly rather than just sprinkling lightly daily. Keep the compost moist but not wet. No swimming lessons for the plants, please. It is important to stake weak stemmed, tall and large headed bulbs.



Fringed tulips add class to the spring border

The quality of aftercare/maintenance given will determine the quality of next seasons display. Remove dead flowers with a secateurs rather than tugging at them. How would you like to have your hair pulled out in clumps rather than being trimmed with care with a scissors? The bane of many gardeners lives is the yellowing foliage left behind once the bulb has finished flowering. This is particularly noticeable with daffodils. Though yellowing leaves are unsightly, never remove them until they are brown and withered, as the leaves contain the food reserves for next season. So what if they look a little unsightly for a while! We all have our own off days and cannot look good all of the time, isn't that true?

As there are bulb types for both full sun and shade, I would suggest that you plant some this year. Why not 'Tip Toe Through The Tulips'? As an aside, if bulbs are not your thing or if you are simply looking for something special for your garden I suggest that you plant some peony roses. For years I shamefully forgot about my love of peonies and concentrated on growing other plants but thankfully my interest in them was reawakened a couple of years back and now I am slowly but surely building up my own collection. I have to admit that I was particularly pleased with the peonies in my garden this year. They rewarded me with beautiful blooms and great grace. I know that I will be planting more of them in autumn.



"Anemone blanda" bulbs are ideal for pots.

Peonies could be described as the gentry of the herbaceous border. They are often flamboyant as they come in both single and double flowers of strong colours. They also come in more subtle shades with stunning colourful seeds. Almost as beautiful as the flowers is the peony foliage so once flowering has finished you have the foliage to look forward to. The most popular peony roses are the *Paeonia lactiflora* types. Most of these are double flowered with large blooms. These large blooms are often described as 'cabbage-rose' blooms. A good pink variety would be *P. Sarah Bernhardt*. If you prefer white blooms consider planting *P. Duchesse de Nemours*. As I write my deep-red *P. President Roosevelt* is in full bloom and worthy of recommendation. Less showy but equally beautiful would be *P. mlokosewitchii* and *P. arianta*. Spend time browsing through the catalogues and visiting your local garden centres and you will soon find varieties that appeal to your personal taste.

Peonies like well drained soil in a sunny or even partially shaded spot. Prepare the soil well before planting by adding organic matter and a fist full of general fertiliser per plant. When planting set the crowns at the same level as they were in the pots when you bought them. If they are planted too deeply they will not flower well. Where space is at a minimum you can always grow peonies in large pots or containers. It is also vital that new plants be kept moist for the first few months after planting.

Feed peony roses each April and August with a general fertiliser such as 7.6.17 or similar at the rate of one handful per plant. Peonies are long lived and easy to grow so I would strongly recommend that you plant one or more this year.

Garden Checklist

- Do not over-water plants but at the same time do not allow plants to dry out.
- Take root cuttings of herbaceous plants such as *Phlox paniculata*, Japanese Anemone, *Anchusa* etc. Cut 6" lengths of fresh vigorous roots straight across the top and slanted at the bottom. Press them vertically into a peat based compost under a polythene cover.
- Plant trees and shrubs. Erect a windbreaker in exposed locations.
- Pull away dead leaves and debris from around rockery plants.



Carpet the ground with mixed bulbs if you have space.



Peonies – a must have in the garden

- Check all garden tools. Wipe tools dry before putting them away for the winter. Sharpen shears and secateurs.
- Service lawn mowers, strimmers etc.
- Create a compost bin.
- Dig soil during mild weather.
- Do some armchair gardening such as planning shrub beds for the future, sourcing materials, reading gardening books and expanding your knowledge, ordering seeds etc.

Happy Gardening!

Anne McKeon

Anne McKeon of Gum Dearg Teoranta, Buaille Beag, Bearna, Galway operates a Garden Design & Advisory Service. Anne presents a gardening spot on Galway Bay FM radio each Thursday morning at 11.40am approx. and writes gardening articles for various publications. Email your queries to anne.

phone : - (091) 521186 • fax : - (091) 582246.
e. mail: annemckeon@eircom.net