

Spider Lilies, Daffodils and Fall Bulbs

Do you ever drive down the road, any road, near the beginning of any of the four seasons, see a beautiful flower in bloom and say "those sure would look good in my yard?" I know I have. It might be daylilies in the summer, spider lilies in the fall, white narcissus in the winter, or gladiolas or irises in the spring.

The problem is that you can't plant it at the time you see it and expect it to bloom right away. So, what can you do to avoid having that happen again? Plan ahead! Now that it's early fall, reflect back to that spring or summer drive and the flower(s) you saw...

By planting now, there's a great chance you will indeed see the desired blooms in your yard next spring, if you follow Extension's advice and guidelines for planting the flower(s) you want to see.

And if nothing says spring to you more than drifts of daffodils and other bulbs, now is the time to plant them here in Bibb County! Dr. Dave Williams, a horticulturist with the Alabama Cooperative Extension System, says the best display of flowers starts with obtaining and planting good quality bulbs.

"The first big step is deciding which ones to plant," says Williams, who is also the head of Auburn University's Department of Horticulture. "Daffodils or narcissus are favorites in the South because they thrive even in our warmer winters. There are literally hundreds to choose from."

He points out that people who plant tulips in Alabama should be prepared to treat them as an annual and replant them every fall. "Tulips are not perennial here. Our winters are not cold enough, and our wet springs can lead to bulb rot."

Other good choices include grape hyacinths and crocuses. Scillas and galanthus are two other spring flowering bulbs that do well in central Alabama.

Williams adds that you may have options other than buying bulbs. "Bulbs are one of the easiest plants to share. Next spring, you may want to ask a friend or neighbor who is dividing their bulbs, especially daffodils, for one or two. Many multiply fairly quickly."

When buying bulbs, check their firmness and buy early to get the best selections available. Another consideration is bulb size. Generally, the larger the bulb is (for the species), the larger the flower is. After you purchase bulbs, keep them cool until planting. Store them at around 50-65 degrees F.

The best planting times are late October to late December for most of Alabama. Williams says that good drainage is crucial to bulbs. You may need to add organic matter if you have a heavy clay soil. Even if you have a well-drained sandy soil, you may need to add additional organic material to increase the soil's ability to hold water and nutrients.

Plant small bulbs 4 to 5 inches deep and space them 1 to 2 inches apart. Large bulbs that are 2 or more inches in height should be planted 6 to 8 inches deep and spaced 3 to 6 inches apart.

A general rule of thumb is to plant slightly shallower in a clay soil, and slightly deeper in sandy soil. Cover the bed with 2 to 3 inches of mulch and let nature take its course. You will be rewarded with colorful blooms of the type you saw driving down the road last spring, this time in your own yard!