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News Release

Tiptoe through the Tulips

Q: I was out driving early last spring, and was taken aback by the most wonderful displays of tulips and daffodils. The colors were so rich and refreshing! I would love to incorporate this vivid palette into my landscape, but unfortunately, I seem to wait until planting time has already passed. When should I plant my spring flowering bulbs, and what are some recommended varieties for this area?

A: You have made the first step in the right direction, planning ahead. Spring bulbs make brilliant splashes of color in the landscape. To achieve this gorgeous spring display, you will need to start now with the purchase of high quality bulbs.



The first step in achieving your masterpiece is to decide which plants you would like to grow. One of the most common spring bulbs is the daffodil or narcissus. It adapts nicely to our warm, southern winters. Another favorite is the tulip; however, let me give you a note of caution. You need to be prepared to treat tulips as annuals and replant them every fall. Our weather conditions are not favorable for tulips to become perennial. The winters are not cold enough, and the wet springs can lead to bulb rot. Hyacinths and crocus are a couple more options to consider.

Once you know what you want, it's time to go shopping. For the best selection, bulbs should be purchased in the early fall. When buying bulbs, one of the most important steps is to check the firmness. Another point to consider is bulb size. Typically, the larger the bulb is, the larger the flower. After you have made your selections, they must remain cool until planting. Store them at around 50-65 degrees Fahrenheit.

The best times to plant your treasures are late October to late December for the majority of Alabama. As you prepare to plant, there are several things to remember: Good drainage is a must

for spring flowering bulbs. You may need to incorporate organic matter if you have a heavy clay soil. If you have a well-drained sandy soil, you still may need to add organic material to increase the soil's ability to hold nutrients and water.

It is best to conduct a soil test to determine the correct amount of fertilizer to add. However, in the absence of a soil test, bulbs can be grown successfully for the first season using a slow-release complete fertilizer. This should be mixed into the rooting area at time of planting.

Plant small bulbs (1 inch in height) 4 to 5 inches deep and space them 1 to 2 inches apart. Larger bulbs (2 inches in height and greater) should be spaced 3 to 6 inches apart and planted 6 to 8 inches deep. Depending on your soil type, you may need to adjust the planting depth. Bulbs should be planted slightly shallower in clay soil and slightly deeper in sandy soil. Once planting is completed, cover the bed with 2 to 3 inches of mulch. Mulch insulates the soil, aids in maintaining even soil moisture, and prevents mud from spattering the flowers. If you have a dry fall, you should water the planting area appropriately.

Now the only thing left to do is wait. If you follow the steps mentioned above, your patience will be greatly rewarded. At the first hint of spring, you will discover a masterpiece in your own yard! Happy Gardening!

For more information about this topic please contact Bethany O'Rear, Regional Extension Agent-Home Grounds, Gardens and Home Pests at the St. Clair County Extension Office at (205) 338-9416 or email bao0004@aces.edu.