While it is becoming widely known that “fall is for planting”, many home gardeners often forget that our spring flowering bulbs get their beginning in the previous fall. If you want beautiful beds of daffodils, tulips or Dutch irises next spring, now is the time to think about planting them.

Spring flowering bulbs are those that generally bloom in our climate between February and April. You may see information dividing these bulbs into categories based on when they bloom in the spring - such as very early, early, mid-season, late and very late. Choosing different types of bulbs that fall into more than one of these categories will help you achieve flowers over a longer season. North Florida springs, however, are neither as long nor mild as those farther north, and spring weather here rapidly transitions into summer heat. This limits our success with some bulbs, and those in the late or very late categories often perform poorly once it gets hot.

When buying bulbs try to purchase the highest quality your budget will allow. Sometimes gardeners can save money on plants by purchasing smaller sizes that, given time, will grow to a larger, higher quality plant. This will not work with bulbs. Hey, bigger is better. Their quality or size will not increase any from the time you plant them until they bloom, and the quality of the bulb you plant relates directly to the quality of the blooms.

Selecting loose bulbs at a local garden center is like choosing produce at the supermarket. Pick the largest, plumpest bulbs that are firm with no obvious cuts, soft spots or rot. When picking out daffodil bulbs, select double nosed bulbs (they look like two bulbs joined together at the base) as these will produce two flower stalks instead of one. If you are ordering from a catalog do so as soon as possible, and generally choose the larger sizes when offered.

How extensive your bulb planting should be depends on a few factors. I think spring flowering bulbs like tulips, daffodils, Dutch irises, ranunculus and many others are an indispensable part of the spring garden. To be honest, however, the flowers of many bulbs are not especially long lasting. A tulip bulb, for instance, produces one flower that lasts about seven to 10 days. Ranunculus are exceptional since they can bloom over a four to six week period. Overall, though, the price you pay for color from bulbs is higher than for longer flowering cool season bedding plants like pansies and dianthus. For most of us, our garden budgets are limited, so spring bulbs are used more for embellishment than for providing the primary floral display.

Good drainage, part to full sun and moderately fertile soil are all that's needed for bulbs to do well. The average landscape bed generally provides adequate drainage, but avoid low spots that tend to stay damp. You know how wet our late winter to spring period can be. If drainage is in doubt, plant in raised beds.

About six hours of direct sun a day will produce the best plants and is especially important for those bulbs that you expect to re-bloom in future years. Bulbs grown as annuals, such as tulips, generally will perform well enough with less light, but avoid very shady areas. If you choose a spot where there is some shade from the afternoon sun, the flowers of spring bulbs may last a little longer, especially if the weather turns warm.
It is important to plant bulbs at the proper depth. A rule of thumb is to plant bulbs at a depth equal to twice their height (although amaryllises are planted with the tip of the bulb above ground). This far south we generally don't plant bulbs quite as deep as standard recommendations. Dig individual holes the proper depth, or excavate out the area to be planted to the recommended depth and plant all of the bulbs at once.

Once the bulbs are planted, you can plant over them with low growing cool season annuals such as alyssum, violas or pansies. Be careful not to disturb the bulbs. The annuals cover the bare soil and provide color before, during and after the bulbs bloom. Make sure the bulbs will produce blooms taller than the annuals, and make sure the colors of the annual flowers contrast with or compliment the flowers of the bulbs in a pleasant way.

The use of long-lived, repeat blooming spring bulbs is not as common in north Florida as it could be. Lack of knowledge and lack of availability are probably the major reasons, but it is worth the effort to obtain and grow these spring delights.

Repeat blooming bulbs are easy to take care of since they are simply left in the ground from year to year, but this works best in a settled situation. Active beds where displays of bedding plants are changed out several times a year create too much disturbance, and you constantly run the risk of digging into the bulbs with a shovel. Choose some out-of-the-way pockets to nestle groups of bulbs -- in front of shrubs, at the base of deciduous trees or in areas of low growing ground covers.

For repeat blooming flowering bulbs to return and bloom each year, you must allow the foliage to persist after flowering. Garden books say to "let the foliage ripen," which basically means do not cut the leaves back until they turn mostly yellow. This critical period allows the plant to store food produced in the green leaves in its bulb. A sufficient amount of food must be stored for the bulb to survive its summer dormant season and grow vigorously and bloom the next year. If the bulbs are growing in a location where you intend to plant something else, they may be lifted and stored once the foliage yellows and replanted in fall.

Although the proper time to plant most bulbs is October and November, there are a couple of notable exceptions. Tulips and hyacinths will perform much better if they are refrigerated at least six weeks in the vegetable bin of your refrigerator prior to planting (storing longer than six weeks is fine). Store them in paper or net bags (well labeled!) away from apples and other fruit. Plant them in late December or early January when the soil has had a chance to get cold.

Ask Rob:

Is fall a good time to prune my Azaleas? Fall is the absolute worst time to prune your azaleas. Azaleas have already set flower buds for next spring so if you prune your azaleas now you will likely cut off all your potential spring flowers. Wait until after they have finished blooming in the spring and then prune them if necessary.
I would like to plant some fruiting plants in my yard but hear they are high maintenance. Are there any that are not difficult to grow? While fruits like apples and peaches are fairly difficult to grow due to high insect and disease problems, homeowners here in north Florida can have a lot of success with low maintenance fruits like blackberries, blueberries, figs, persimmons, loquat, and some varieties of pear. One thing to keep in mind is November is the ideal time to order from fruit catalogs.