Time to Plant Spring Bulbs

The weather is slowly getting cooler! Fall is finally on its way. It is time to get out there and start gardening again. Not only is fall a great time to plant the woody trees and shrubs, but it is also THE time to plant spring and early summer flowering bulbs. From the most common bulbs like tulips, hyacinths, and daffodils, to the less frequently used allium, crocus, and galanthus, fall is the time to get to work.

When considering adding fall-planted bulbs into your landscape, a good idea is to plan in the spring. Take pictures of your gardens in full bloom, so that you know where you have space to fill in. Decide what bulbs will work depending on space requirements, height, and color. It is never good when your tulips all decide to sprout in front of your beautiful phlox. Not only does it block your view of the plants, but also it blocks out the sunshine that the phlox needs to survive. So plan carefully, when deciding where to place your bulbs.

Purchasing the bulbs to use in your garden area is the next important step in this process. Buy early to get the best quality and selection. The size of the bulb is directly related to the size and number of flowers it will produce. So, select accordingly. If you notice small nicks and loose skin on the bulb that is all right. This will aid you in looking for signs of disease, and it will also aid the plant in creating good conditions for rooting. Once you have the bulbs, you may have to wait before planting. Store them in a cool area (50-65° F), and keep them away from ripening fruit that produces ethylene gas.

Once the soil temperature has reached about 60° F, it is time to plant. Select a location that is well drained and has a pH of between 6 and 7. Our area has a typical pH of around 5, so make sure you do a soil sample to check if you need to add lime. Soil samples are free in the state of North Carolina, and the materials and information can be obtained at the Extension Center. When planting the bulbs, make sure to plant deep enough to avoid winter frosts. Small sized bulbs should be planted approximately 5 inches deep, while larger ones should be planted about 8 inches deep. Cover with half the soil and then water thoroughly. Cover with the remaining soil and water again. Once the soil is back in place, cover with 2 to 3 inches of mulch. This will help to protect and insulate the plants through the winter. If the fall is extremely dry, water occasionally.
Fertilization is a great way to give the bulbs a boost. North Carolina Cooperative Extension recommends an application of a sulfur-coated complete fertilizer during planting. Incorporate the fertilizer into the rooting area and soil as you fill in around the bulb.

When your plants emerge in the spring, enjoy their beauty. When the flower petals die, they can be easily removed by hand or with scissors. Allow the foliage to die naturally. If you desire, you can overplant with summer annuals to keep the area fresh and colorful all season long.

Bulbs are a great way to get an early pop of color in the spring with little care involved. So hurry, get out there, and get planting!

If you have any questions, comments, or concerns about this or any other topic, please feel free to contact me, Kerrie Roach, horticultural Extension agent, at North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Robeson County Center, at 910-671-3276 or by E-mail at Kerrie_Roach@ncsu.edu or visit North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Robeson County Center’s website at Robeson.ces.ncsu.edu.