

Bulbs in the border

GWF321
Updated September 2007

Bulbs are so familiar that perhaps we don't always give them the attention they deserve. They are low maintenance and are the ideal way to extend interest in beds and borders.

Late winter and early spring

After the long dark dreary days of December the first snowdrops and crocuses are a real treat - their fragile blooms standing up stoutly to the very worst weather that January and February can throw at them.

Don't forget that to be fully appreciated, late winter- and early spring-flowering bulbs need to be grown where they are clearly visible from well-used paths and from inside the house. Bulbs at the far end of a garden may not be seen at all.

- ❖ Snowdrops are fantastic in combination with other late winter favourites. A drift looks stunning against the vivid red stems of the dogwood *Cornus alba* 'Sibirica' or the winter red foliage of *Bergenia* 'Ballawley'. Perennials that flower at this time of year are few and far between. A notable exception is the hellebore, and a partnership of snowdrops and hellebores gives the border a cohesive feel. Snowdrops prefer to grow in the semi-shade offered by deciduous shrubs and trees.

- ❖ Winter-flowering aconite (*Eranthis hyemalis*) likes the sun. Cleverly positioned in a border lacking winter cheer, a mass of these low-growing, bright yellow

flowers can look like a patch of sunshine. Aconites can be temperamental to establish, but are well worth the effort.

- ❖ Blue-flowering scillas and chionodoxas bring a welcome alternative in a season often dominated by bright yellow. Another blue gem is the little *Iris reticulata* - its delicate structure is a delight.

- ❖ Crocuses come into their own as the year progresses. In borders amongst shrubs and dormant perennials, use shorter or species varieties rather than the highly bred cultivars. Crocuses come in many colours and using them in drifts of mixed colours or blocks of a single colour gives different effects. Try *Crocus tomassinianus* with the snake skin leaves and magenta flowers of *Cyclamen coum*.

- ❖ The golden rule for daffodils in the border is to use only one variety. A mix of numerous varieties can look a mess. Again, think about planting partners for daffodils. A nearby forsythia or yellow variegated elaeagnus provides a perfect echo, while a bright pink flowering quince (*Chaenomeles*) underplanted with bright yellow daffodils flaunts the contrast.

Late spring and summer

There is a greater range of flower shape and colour in bulbs at this time of year. They will be flowering alongside perennials that were dormant earlier in the year. We can use bulbs to give bold accents of colour, either complementary to other plants or perhaps to add zest to borders that might otherwise be somewhat bland.

- ❖ Tulips give a vertical dimension with their strong upright form, and rich array of pure colours and bi-colours plus the more unusual colours such as the deep purple 'Queen of Night'. Exotic parrot tulips add an air of opulence and extravagance and graceful lily-flowered tulips bring a touch of eastern finesse. For the semi-shade offered by deciduous shrubs and trees, try the woodland favourite English bluebells (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*).

- ❖ Lilies are deservedly popular, adding stateliness to borders. There is a huge choice of colours and shapes, from the statuesque and fragrant *Lilium regale* to the dainty martagon or turkscap lilies such as *L. chalcedonicum*.

- ❖ Other summer-flowering bulbs well worth a try are the **alliums**. Like tulips, they provide strong

form with their round heads of primarily purple flowers. *Allium schubertii* and *A. christophii* have very dramatic flowers, adding real pizzazz to the border. Others can be used more quietly, to pick up a pink or purple colour theme. If you want to try other colours look out for *A. moly*, an old favourite with yellow flowers, but it can be invasive; *A. caeruleum*, with its sky blue flowers; *A. sphaerocephalon*; has dense flowerheads of crimson-purple. Try growing *Allium hollandicum* through hostas or *A. sphaerocephalon* with annual cornflowers.

❖ Most gladioli are not hardy, and need lifting each autumn. However, for a splash of really rich magenta try the hardy

Gladiolus communis subsp. *byzantinus* with silver foliage plants such as *Artemisia*.

Late summer and autumn

As summer turns into autumn, there are some late-flowering bulbs which extend the season when many perennials are past their best. There is less choice than earlier in the year, but nerines and schizostylus are valuable additions to the border. Both need as much autumn sun as possible to do well.

❖ The familiar *Nerine bowdenii* flowers in a shade of pink that is more reminiscent of spring and early summer than autumn.

❖ *Schizostylus coccinea* flowers long into the autumn. *S. coccinea* 'Mrs Hegarty' is pale pink and will need placing with care amongst the predominantly rich colours of autumn while *S. coccinea* 'Major' is crimson-red. Combine with the scarlet foliage and berries of *Cotoneaster horizontalis* for an end of season show.

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