

It’s not too late to keep that promise of spring

GARDEN MIND

By Rebecca Hart

Spring-flowering bulbs are one of the traditional harbingers of seasonal change.

A gardener’s hope emerges with the first sighting of yellow daffodils, or seeing a green-edged white snow-drop, pushing up through snow and ice. We’re convinced that longer and brighter days are just ahead.

You could say that’s a big load for the lowly and humble bulb to carry, but it’s a job bulbs do well.

All plants hold the mystery of beauty, but there’s something about the process of putting a bulb—with its crinkly tissue-like husk—down into a hole opened in the dirt, then covered back up, to sleep.

At some strange signal the miracle happens and a stem emerges from the soil and a blossom announces the arrival of spring. For some, the act of buying and planting bulbs is akin to initiation.

Congratulations if you took the plunge. If you too are awaiting your spring display, you share company with untold numbers of gardeners, since those early plant collectors tens of thousands of years ago.

To a novice gardener, it may seem strange to buy these odd things, bulbs, with their bare brown or golden or white packets of promise. They are ugly! They have no flowers!

Spring bulbs, which bloom from February into May, add color and contrast to your spring garden. They’re for sale at the same time the fall flowers show up on retail shelves, to compete with the seasonal dazzlers: flowering kale, chrysanthemums, and the stately white or pink Japanese Anemones.

Possibly the astute gardener notices

a few odd specimens of the flowering bulb Colchicum, the autumn crocus, with its pale lavender flower, on display in a box with sawdust, but with not one single leaf. It dawns on you that the crocus family is more complicated than you knew.

Yet each and every year it’s the same, you can set your clock by it; we are told to *buy early for the best selection*. If we’re good, we comply. If you are like me you hunt early, and purchase quickly.

Maybe last spring you made notes in your garden journal, determined to make improvements. Maybe a magazine article or a neighbor’s yard held more “juice,” and now you need something different.

I’m still looking for a bearded iris in the same shade of pink as my Cynthia rhododendrons. At the garden center those spring bulbs sit in their bags with bright pictures promising aesthetic victory for you.

The bulb itself contains the food for this year’s plant; food is stored in the bulb. Food for future seasons is produced by the mysterious act of photosynthesis, a process where the energy in sunlight is transferred to chlorophyll cells in leaves (which create the color green) and in turn is stored as energy back down in the bulb of the plant, for next year’s display.

Bulbs are among the bargains of the plant world: generous and lovely. To me, these attributes are defined not only by beauty, but also because bulbs reproduce themselves *and* they return annually to shower beauty on the landscape, with little effort on the part of humans, once we make the initial effort to obtain and plant them.

Editor’s Note: Have questions or comments for Rebecca? Email her via news@multnomahpost.com or write to: Garden Mind, The Southwest Portland Post, 4207 SE Woodstock Blvd #509, Portland, OR 97206.



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