

Crazy for spring bulbs? Start flipping through the catalogs now.

By Blair Farris

It seems crazy to be thinking about spring bulbs in the middle of September, but now really is the perfect time to peruse bulb catalogs and websites. If you buy now, your bulbs will be shipped just in time for the late-October-to-November planting season.



Bulbs can be a welcome splash of color in any garden and there are thousands of varieties to choose from that gardeners have been using for centuries. A well-known example of how bulbs can enhance a landscape is the gardens at the Biltmore Estate in Asheville, N.C. George Vanderbilt finished the Biltmore, the largest privately-owned home in the United States, in 1895. Vanderbilt hired famed landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted to design the extensive grounds. With more than 100,000 bulbs that bloom in the spring and summer, it is a spring sight that should not be missed.

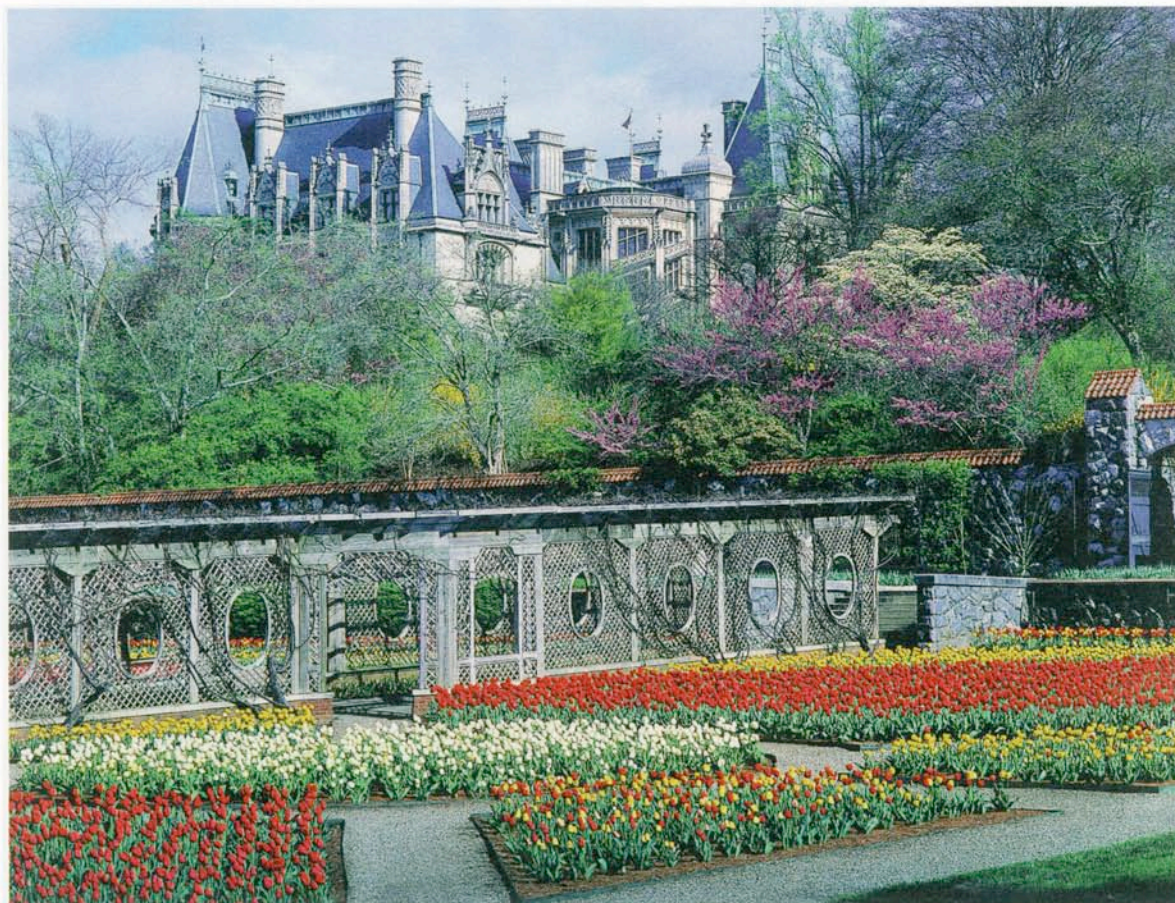
Parker Andes, Director of Horticulture at the Biltmore, said that they plant early and late bloomers in the same hole to get a longer bloom time. The early bloomers are the Darwin Hybrids and the Triumph Tulips. The late bloomers are the single and double late tulips and the species tulips. His personal favorite bulb is the Tahiti Daffodil with its gaudy show of ruffled orange and yellow petals. The Biltmore Estate has literally thousands of bulbs that bloom throughout the season.

For the remainder of the column, I will use “bulb” generically even though the bulb may technically be a rhizome, corm or tuber. They are all different but each has some way of storing nutrients and food underground.

Preparing the soil

One of the biggest problems with bulbs is that they rot. So, in general, bulbs need soil that retains moisture but that drains well. Bulbs don't like heavy clay that retains too much water during wet periods, so it is well worth the effort to amend your soil properly.

The best rule of thumb is to combine three-parts loam, one-part peat and half-part sand, or you can take the easy route



and buy potting soil from a garden store. If it is heavy with clay, loam and sand, you will need to amend your soil to a depth of 1 foot to insure proper drainage.

Plant bulbs at a depth three times the size of the bulb. So if you have a 2-inch daffodil, you will plant it about 6 inches under the ground. Be sure to feed the bulbs with a good fertilizer high in phosphorus, which is the middle number on fertilizers. Use bone meal, found at any hardware store, and mix it in with the soil while planting. The bulbs will be able to absorb it more easily.

If you have a problem with squirrels, plant a large area at once and cover it with chicken wire under the surface of the dirt. I like to sprinkle cayenne pepper on the ground around the bulbs to deter the critters.

My favorite bulbs

I love tulips but they last only 10 days. Daffodils are deer-resistant and they have a long bloom time. King Alfred and Dutch Master are two fabulous daffodils:

large, traditional, yellow and naturalizing. They are stunning behind masses of Crocus Twilight with her deep, midnight-blue petals and orange center, and Muscari Armeniacum with her bright, cobalt blue. I like to plant Daylilies on top of daffodils. When the foliage is dying back, the Daylilies are starting to come out.

It's best to let the foliage of bulbs die back naturally. It is tempting to want to cut them back and tidy up but this is the crucial food that the bulbs store up for their display the next year.

I could write pages and pages about bulbs: alliums, iris, scillas, fritillaria, dahlias – and the list goes on. Alas, it's time to peruse those bulb catalogs and get ready for fall planting! ■

For more than 16 years, Blair Farris, a Charlotte-based landscape designer, has used her education and talents to create beautiful and interesting spaces for commercial and residential properties. Visit her website at www.blairfarrisdesigns.com.

Photo courtesy of the The Biltmore Company.

Tip of the Month

Plant bulbs in mass for a big show. Plant them with perennials that come up early such as Daylilies and Peonies to mask the bulbs' unsightly foliage as it dies back.

For the reader

“Garden Bulbs for the South” by Scott Ogden
An insightful book on bulbs that all southern gardeners should have in their collection.

Resources

The Gardens at Blackhawk Hardware

4225 Park Road
Charlotte NC 28209
704.525.2682
www.blackhawkhardware.com

The Biltmore Estate

www.biltmore.com
828.225.1600
Biltmore Estate Bulb Collection by the Netherland Bulb Company.
A wonderful mix of their favorite bulbs.

“Bulb Catalog”

Van Engelen Inc.
www.vanengelen.com
80.567.8734