



The Bulb Garden displays an extensive collection of the best hardy bulbs for Midwest gardens. These bulbs grow among complementary perennials, shrubs, trees and ground covers to create beautiful landscape settings.

Discover the color, variety and excitement that bulbs can bring to a garden spring, summer and fall.

EDNA KANALEY GRAHAM BULB GARDEN

The Edna Kanaley Graham Bulb Garden, which opened in 1984, displays beautiful hardy bulbs in landscape settings. Today the garden is one of the most comprehensive displays in North America, containing over 130,000 bulbs of 400 varieties.

What is a “bulb”?

The term “bulb” refers generally to a plant that stores energy in an underground storage unit. The plant uses the storage unit like a bank, depositing energy when conditions are good and withdrawing energy when conditions are harsh.

Bulbs, as used here, include true bulbs (lily, tulip), corms (crocus), tubers (Greek windflower), tuberous roots (winter aconite) and rhizomes (iris, daylily).

Planting bulbs

At the Chicago Botanic Garden, bulbs that bloom in spring or summer are planted in mid- to late October. Fall-blooming bulbs are usually planted the preceding summer or in early fall. Bulbs planted early enough, in well-drained soil that is rich in organic matter, will bloom beautifully for years to come.

You will have greater success with bulbs planted next to plants that require less water during the growing season, such as daylilies and black-eyed Susans.

Naturalized bulbs return

The Bulb Garden features a wide collection of bulbs that grow as perennials. These naturalized bulbs come back year after year to grow, bloom and multiply. In the Midwest, naturalized bulbs must be hardy to thrive in subzero temperatures.

Species vs. cultivars

Both hardy species and cultivars grow throughout the Bulb Garden. Species bulbs grow wild in nature, seeding themselves and covering more territory with time. They require little maintenance and are appealing in informal drifts or masses.

Cultivars, or cultivated varieties, are often grown for a specific feature such as intense fragrance or unusual color. Although many hardy cultivars can be grown as perennials, seedlings of hybrid cultivars may not resemble the parent plant.

BULBS IN THE LANDSCAPE

Bulbs bring brilliant color and endless variety to a garden. The Bulb Garden illustrates many of the ways that bulbs can be integrated into the landscape.

Drifts

Groups of bulbs growing in informal drifts or masses look more natural than individual bulbs growing in rows. To achieve this naturalized look, plant groups of bulbs in irregular clumps and drifts. Or toss handfuls of bulbs into the air and plant them where they land.

Mixed beds and borders

Bulbs make ideal bed and border companions for long-lasting plants such as shrubs, ground covers and long-term perennials. When planted among other perennials, bulbs that bloom as early as March or as late as September can extend the bloom season by several months.

Raised beds and containers

Raised beds and containers located in a sunny spot provide the extra drainage that bulbs crave. They also make good homes for bulbs that need soil different from that in the rest of the garden. And containers are a great place to grow non-hardy or tropical bulbs—the bulbs can be easily lifted after blooms fade without disturbing more permanent bulbs.

Shady areas

Although most bulbs prefer sun, some favor the moist, light shade provided by woodlands or the north side of a house. This light shade can extend the flowering period of sun-lovers during years when spring temperatures are unusually high. Shade-loving bulbs such as Siberian squill, anemone and dog-tooth violet grow well with other shade lovers, including ferns and hostas.

Rock gardens

Rock gardens provide ideal growing conditions and beautiful settings for miniature bulbs. The nooks and crannies between the rocks furnish bulbs with excellent drainage, warmer temperatures and moderate shelter from strong rains or wind. The natural ruggedness of the rocks accentuates the color and delicate beauty of tiny bulbs such as midget daffodils, squills or snowdrops.

TO LEARN MORE

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CHICAGO BOTANIC GARDEN

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The Chicago Botanic Garden is owned by the Forest Preserve District of Cook County.

SELECTING BULBS FOR ALL SEASONS

Bulbs aren't just for spring. If planned carefully, they can provide color, interest and beauty throughout the year. In the Bulb Garden, different kinds of bulbs are planted in the same space, or in layers, so as the seasons change, the garden is constantly filled with a succession of colorful blooms.

Our horticulturists recommend these hardy bulbs for Midwest gardens:

Early spring bulbs

Common snowdrop (*Galanthus nivalis*)

This tiny beauty has nodding, white bell-shaped blossoms.

Crocus (*Crocus vernus*)

Large, colorful bowl-shaped blooms welcome spring.

Dwarf iris (*Iris reticulata*)

Smaller and more delicate than its taller cousin, this blue to maroon iris is perfect for well-drained rock gardens.

Midspring bulbs

Crown imperial fritillary (*Fritillaria imperialis*)

Striking bell-shaped flowers, from yellow to red, hang from the top of tall stems.

Daffodil (*Narcissus* spp.)

This plant naturalizes very well and comes in a wide variety of sizes, color combinations and bloom times.

Dog-tooth violet or trout lily (*Erythronium* spp.)

Its delicate star-shaped flower hangs from a wiry stem. It prefers partial shade and moist soil.

Greek windflower (*Anemone blanda*)

Daisylike flowers in shades of white, pink, blue or mauve complement fernlike foliage.

Species tulips (*Tulipa* spp.)

These little tulips naturalize well and are available in a variety of colors. Some flower in early spring.

Late spring bulbs

Giant onion (*Allium giganteum*)

This striking beauty stands above the garden with a large ball of small purple florets.

Summer bulbs

Asiatic lily hybrid (*Lilium* cultivars)

These elegant lilies feature many blooms per stem and usually stand less than 3 feet tall.

Species lily (*Lilium* spp.)

Late-summer blooms are prized for their fragrance, twisted petals and red or white spots.

Trumpet lily (*Lilium* cultivars)

These flowers have trumpet shape, unusual colors and extended bloom times.

Autumn bulbs

Autumn crocus (*Colchicum* spp.)

This plant is similar to spring-blooming crocus but is a little taller.

Magic lily (*Lycoris squamigera*)

Clusters of trumpet-shaped flowers sit on 2- to 3-foot stalks.

Ozawa onion (*Allium thunbergii* 'Ozawa')

A small flowering ball of rose-pink florets blooms atop a single stem.

YEAR-ROUND COMPLEMENTS FOR BULBS

- 1 Bugbane
(*Cimicifuga racemosa* 'Atropurpurea')
Blooms late summer or early fall. This perennial blooms with white flowers against purple foliage.
- 2 Butterfly bush (*Buddleja davidii*)
Blooms midsummer. Long clusters of fragrant lilac flowers attract butterflies and bees.
- 3 Coral bells
(*Heuchera micrantha* 'Palace Purple')
Blooms late summer. Red-purple foliage and white flowers grace this perennial.
- 4 Fragrant viburnum (*Viburnum farreri*)
Blooms early spring. This shrub's pink buds turn to white fragrant flowers.
- 5 Japanese anemone
(*Anemone* × *hybrida* 'Honorine Jobert')
Blooms late summer. This perennial features leathery leaves and white flowers.
- 6 Kentucky wisteria (*Wisteria macrostachya*)
Blooms early summer. Lilac-blue flowers adorn this perennial vine.
- 7 Lily turf (*Liriope spicata*)
Blooms late summer. This perennial ornamental grass grows to hide spring bulb foliage.
- 8 Merrill magnolia (*Magnolia* × *loebneri* 'Merrill')
Blooms midspring. This round-headed tree has white fragrant flowers.
- 9 Smokebush
(*Cotinus coggygria* 'Royal Purple')
Blooms midsummer. The flower structure of this shrub resembles pinkish-purple smoke.

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