

Growing Spring Planted Bulbs



There are many popular and unusual varieties of plants that can be started from bulbs in the spring. Most are tropical or subtropical plants that would otherwise not be hardy in our harsh Wisconsin winters. These can be purchased each year and treated as annuals, or dug up in the fall and stored for the winter, to be replanted again the following spring. A few, such as **Asiatic and Oriental lilies**, are hardy and can be left in the ground to be enjoyed year after year.

Two basic methods can be used to start your spring-planted bulbs. One is to pot the bulb indoors in late winter or early spring. A potted bulb/plant may be used as a container plant or planted outdoors when the temperatures warm up. This method is often used for slow-growing bulbs, such as **tuberous begonias, calla lilies, caladiums, elephant ears and freesias**.

The other method is to wait for the temperatures to warm up sufficiently, and then plant the bulbs directly in the ground outside. This method works well for **anemones, dahlias, gladiolus, and most lilies**.

Most spring planted bulbs like regular watering and fertilizing to help sustain fast growth and flowering. However, when starting bulbs indoors, water sparingly until the plants begin to leaf out. Too much water at this time can cause the bulbs to rot!

Tuberous Begonias should be started in pots inside in midwinter. The “cup” of the bulb should face upwards when planting. Pot them up with the tuber exposed, and then cover with 1” of soil after growth has started. Move to a shady location outdoors around Memorial Day. A little morning sun is beneficial.

Caladiums are best started indoors from February to mid April. Plant the bulbs 1” to 2” deep. It’s important that the bulbs stay warm -- 75° to 80° F is ideal. They can be moved outside to a shady location around Memorial Day.

Calla Lilies should be started indoors in February or March. Plant the bulbs 1” deep in a well drained potting soil, and place them in full sun. They can be moved outdoors around Memorial Day, and do best in full sun to part shade. Callas like lots of water while growing.

Cannas are great at adding a tropical look to the summer garden. They can either be planted directly outdoors around Memorial Day, or else started inside in pots 4 to 6 weeks earlier. Either way, plant them with the bud/eye/sprout up, and cover with about 2” of soil. They like full sun and lots of water. Adding a layer of mulch helps them from drying out too fast.

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Dahlias love a location with lots of sun. They can be started inside in pots in late April or May, or planted directly in the ground around Memorial Day. When planting outside, space the bulbs 18" to 24" apart. Dig a hole 12" deep and put a stake in the center of the hole. Place the tuber in, and cover with 2" to 3" of soil. **DO NOT WATER** until you see growth. As the plant grows, fill in the rest of the hole with good garden soil. Water regularly, and fertilize with flower or tomato fertilizer every 3 to 4 weeks.

Day Lilies are hardy perennials that can tolerate a wide variety of garden conditions, from full sun to part shade. They can be started inside a few weeks early, or planted directly outside as soon as the ground can be worked. Dig a hole as deep as the roots, and about twice as wide. Make a mound of soil in the center of the hole, and spread the roots over the mound. Fill in with the remaining soil, making sure the crown of the plant (where the roots attach to the leaves) stays even with the surface. Mulch around the plant to help maintain even moisture around the roots.

Elephant Ears are easy and make quite an impact with their enormous leaves. Start them early indoors in pots twice as wide as the bulbs, with the bulbs facing eye-up and just exposed above the soil. Once growth has started, keep them moist at all times. They may be moved outdoors to a partly shaded to full shade location (or full sun with lots of moisture!) at the end of May.

Freesias should be started indoors 5-6 weeks before the last frost. Plant them close together and a few inches deep in well drained soil. Keep them in a

basement window or unheated (but frost-free) sun room. Move them outdoors to a sunny spot after the last frost. Freesias are best left in their containers so they can be moved inside during frosty nights.

Lilies should be planted outside as soon as the ground can be worked. If you can't plant them right away, store them in a cool, dark location, such as a basement or refrigerator. Plant them in well drained soil in part to full sun, 6" to 8" deep and 12" to 16" apart. Water them in thoroughly to ensure that the soil settles around the bulb. Mulch well in the fall to provide winter protection. Don't overfeed! A little fertilizer before flowering and again after is all a lily needs.

Tree Peonies are related to common garden peonies, but grow much larger and have woody stems. Until the soil is workable, they should be stored in slightly moist peat in a cool, dark location. They should be planted in a location where they have some protection from the mid-day sun. Dig a deep hole when planting, so that when you put the tree peony in the ground, the graft union is 4" to 6" below the soil line. The graft union is where the woody stem is swollen above the roots. Only a couple of inches of the stem should show above the soil when the hole is filled back in. A 2" to 3" layer of mulch around the plant is beneficial, but make sure to keep it a few inches away from the woody stem to prevent fungal infection and rot.



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