

With Spring Bulbs, Timing Is Everything

While it may seem strange, spring-flowering bulbs need to be planted in fall in order to bloom come show time. The bulbs need a certain amount of time to get established before winter's freezing weather sets in, and they need enough time exposed to cool soil temperatures to be properly chilled. But fall doesn't occur at the same time on the calendar in San Antonio, Texas, as it does in Minneapolis, Minnesota. So how do you know whether to plant in September or November?

Know Your Hardiness Zone Map

The simplest solution is to use the USDA Climate Hardiness Zone Map as your planting guide. This map breaks the country into 11 growing zones based on average annual winter minimum temperatures. First use the map to find which hardiness zone you live in. Then follow the table below to know when to plant spring-flowering bulbs in your zone.

Zone 1 (below -50° F): Early September

Zone 2 (-50 to -40° F): Early September

Zone 3 (-40 to -30° F): September

Zone 4 (-30 to -20° F): Late September to early October

Zone 5 (-20 to -10° F): Late September to early October

Zone 6 (-10 to 0° F): Mid-October

Zone 7 (0 to 10° F): Early November

Zone 8 (10 to 20° F): Early November

Zone 9* (20 to 30° F): Early December

Zone 10* (30 to 40° F): Mid-December

Zone 11* (Above 40° F): Late December

* Additional chilling may be needed to grow spring-flowering bulbs in these regions.

Special Considerations for Bulbs in Colder Areas

In coldest areas (USDA Climate Hardiness Zones 1 through 4), bulbs grow and perform best if planted early enough (September) to get established before the ground freezes. Mulch the bed a month after planting with a 3- to 4-inch layer of hay, straw, or shredded leaves. This will allow the soil to stay warm enough for the bulb roots to get established and will protect tender bulbs from freezing injury during winter, especially if the snow cover is sparse.

Planting Bulbs in Warmer Areas

In the warmest-winter areas (zones 7 through 11), select bulb varieties that are best adapted to warm winters, such as wild tulips that are native to southern Europe. Most large-flowered tulips, hyacinths, and crocus will need supplemental chilling. To chill the bulbs before planting, place them in the refrigerator crisper for 8 to 10 weeks (but keep bulbs away from fruits or vegetables; they give off ethylene gas, which can cause the bud inside a bulb to abort), then plant. Since the ground rarely freezes deeply, if at all, in these areas, bulbs can be planted into December or even early January.

Storing Bulbs Before Planting

Most flowering bulbs are best stored at temperatures between 60°F and 68°F. Try to keep the humidity in the storage area as low as possible. Bulbs can be stored in a container with peat moss, sand, perlite or vermiculite. Another common storage method is to place the bulbs in a very loose knit sack and hang in a sheltered, cool area. Do not divide or separate bulbs before storing them.