

Twelve Tiny Bulbs to Light Up Your Spring Garden
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Greetings, fellow gardeners. We have been blessed with a string of October's bright blue days – just perfect for getting the garden ready for the winter just before the challenges of what promises to be the most unusual holiday season we have experienced.

Mid October brings to mind thoughts of bulbs – not those tiny, twinkles we use to trim trees, wreaths and flower arrangements during the upcoming holidays. No, I am thinking of those tiny bulbs that bring sparkle and sunshine to early spring's sometimes dreary days. October and November here in central Virginia is a good time to be planting bulbs; the ground is in good condition and the temperatures are not likely to cause a heat stroke. The big bright tulips and daffodils are a major spring delight, but even before those make an appearance, we are delighted by the small, colorful, sometimes called "minor" bulbs, that pop up in late winter and early spring. So let's look at a dozen or so of these little spring bright spots. The bulbs are small and most of the flowers and foliage hug the ground, the better to cope with uncertain weather.

The first wave of these little bulbs will start blooming in late winter and very early spring. Included in these early risers are:

Snowdrops. These dependable delicate looking white bells sometimes come up through ice and snow. The single form is best known, but there is also a double form. They naturalize readily and last for many years.

Crocus. The crocus is as well known as the daffodil and the sturdy blooms of the early species crocus cheerfully withstand freezing rain, wind and even snow. Their satiny cup shaped flowers can be found in white and shades of purple, orange and gold.

Squills. These tiny bright blue star shaped bells on four inch stems will brighten up the grayest day. The Siberian squill, widely available, is a good variety and I cannot think of any other spring bloomer that can match that bright blue color.

Iris (reticulata). Unlike their tall, later blooming cousins, these tiny irises can cope with periods of cold and even snow. The yellow flowered danfordiae variety is even earlier to bloom and copes well with bad weather.

Grecian windflowers. These little beauties resemble blue, pink or white daisies, only four to six inches tall. Their ferny foliage is charming and delicate in appearance, but it stands up to cold wind, rain and early spring snow.

Winter aconites. True to their name, these bulbs send up their flowers in winter. They grow about four inches high and look like buttercups, and each bright yellow bloom has a ruffle of green leaves around it.

The first wave of very early flowers does not last very long, but they are closely followed by, and frequently overlapped by, the second wave of tiny bulbs in mid to late spring.

Miniature Daffodils. Some varieties of these miniatures are only three or four inches tall and the tallest come in around 10 or 12 inches. Otherwise, they look just like their larger, later blooming cousins. They can be found in white, various shades of yellow and some yellow/white bicolors.

Crocus. The later blooming crocus are the Dutch hybrids with larger flowers, in bright purples, yellows, oranges, blues and white.

Grape Hyacinths. There are many varieties of grape hyacinth, some of which look quite different from the familiar purple spikes that seldom get taller than eight inches. They naturalize and multiply readily in our climate and last for many years. Since the bulbs are inexpensive, they can be planted in impressive drifts.

Alliums. The best known of these charmers is the chive from the herb garden. It blooms a little later, its pinky-lavender balls of blossom blending well with the late flowering tulips. Many other alliums, in shades of yellow, pink and white are available for planting in the flower garden.

Fritillarias are also known as guinea hen flowers or checkered lilies. Each bulb has one or two dainty bell shaped white or checkered purple flowers on a twelve inch stem. The lily like foliage disappears shortly after the blooms and this one does well with some shade.

Wood hyacinth blooms resemble the Lily of the Valley and flower a little later. You might find the bulbs labeled as Spanish Bluebells or English Bluebells. They can be found in blue, white and pink, and will bloom well in partial shade.

These little bulbs do not need to be planted deeply – two or three inches in most cases. As with most bulbs, with a few exceptions noted, they must have a sunny spot and well drained soil. Consistently soggy soil will result in rotted bulbs. For even earlier bloom, plant in a south-facing location, protected from the wind. Always provide a mulch. It is sometimes hard to remember where you put which bulbs, so it is a good idea to label as you plant, or at least draw yourself a diagram. After all, you don't want inadvertently to dig them up. Most of these little bulbs can be planted under deciduous trees, since they will bloom and mature their foliage before the tree canopy has matured. And, this is very important – do not cut the foliage before it matures if you want flowers next year.

These little bulbs look best planted in groups. Some ideas to start with:

A cluster (dozen or so) of bright crocus at the foot of your steps – more effective if you use just one color

A sweep of tiny yellow daffodils next to a sunny walkway

A ruffle of pink, blue and white squills along a shaded path

A pool of sky-blue squills beneath a large tree

A carpet of Grecian windflowers around a bird bath

A drift of snowdrops in a shady glade

Page 2

Page 3

If you don't have time or inclination to go digging in the garden, many of these little bulbs perform well when planted in pots for indoor bloom. A cold period of six to eight weeks is required for root growth, so now is a good time to pot them up. A good guide to forcing bulbs, "Forcing Flower Bulbs for Indoor Bloom," Publication # Hort-76NP and a good general

explanation of bulb growing called "Bulbs for a Red, White and Blue Spring Garden," publication #426-220, are available on the Virginia Cooperative Extension Service website at: ext.vt.edu. Another good source of general gardening information is the Heart of Virginia Master Gardeners Website: HOVMG.org.

The Heart of Virginia Master Gardeners wishes you a safe, healthy and happy Holiday Season. We will be back in January to talk more about gardening. Meanwhile, fellow gardeners, keep on growing.

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