



Bulb Buddies

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY
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Planting spring bulbs with the right companions makes for doubly pleasing displays.

OH, THE THRILL of unpacking fall bulb purchases—followed by the frustration of wandering around the garden, bulbs in one hand and a trowel in the other, trying to figure out where to put them. Before you pop them into the first empty spaces you find, just to get the job done, consider the lovely blooms they are likely to bring you for years to come. Isn't it worth putting in a little time to find their perfect place, with companions that will complement them both during *and* after their period of peak beauty? There are two aspects to consider when considering companions for your bulbs: what they'll look like during bloom time, and what they'll do once the bulbs are finished for the season.



Opposite: Patches of hybrid Lenten roses (*Helleborus* × *hybridus*) provide plenty of opportunities for bulb plantings. Their clumps look dense and broad in fall, but if you lift the leaves, you'll find plenty of empty space under them. Make use of that space by adding bulbs such as crocuses (*Crocus* spp.), snowdrops (*Galanthus* spp.), and early daffodils. Here it is matched with 'Ocean Magic' grape hyacinth (*Muscari aucheri*). The Lenten roses will contribute their own colorful blooms to the spring show, then their leaves will fill the space left when the bulbs go dormant. Above: Snowdrops (*G. nivalis*) emerge amid a carpet of moss. These and other small bulbs, such as crocuses and glory-of-the-snow (*Scilla* spp.), have an easy time coming up through low-growing groundcovers with relatively loose root systems. In shady sites, in addition to moss, consider tucking them among Allegheny pachysandra (*Pachysandra procumbens*) and partridgeberry (*Mitchella repens*).

After a long dull winter, the sight of any flowers is so welcome that it's easy to overlook bare soil or mulch around them—until those pristine blooms get splashed with mud or knocked face-first into the ground by spring storms. You can avoid that, though, if you tuck bulbs into established groundcovers. Low-growing evergreen groundcovers pair perfectly with the earliest bulbs, while later bulbs look great rising out of proportionally

taller groundcovers. Well-chosen partners can provide physical support for slender stems or top-heavy stalks. They also serve as a living mulch, keeping the bulb flowers clean and contributing complementary colors and forms as well.

Because hardy bulbs are generally around for only part of the growing season, you also want to think about how their buddies will fill the above-ground space left when the bulbs go dormant.

Spaces like these aren't obvious when you're planting in fall, but if you lift the sprawling foliage around clump-forming perennials, or if you look back to spring pictures of your garden, you'll find plenty of empty spaces that are perfect for filling with bulbs.

Once you start looking for prime spots for bulb planting—spaces that are filled in fall but otherwise empty or underutilized early in the year—you may find that you



With its low growth habit and ever-present, super-dark foliage, black mondo grass (*Ophiopogon planiscapus* 'Nigrescens') makes a marvelous buddy for relatively short-stemmed bulbs—such as 'White Festival' hyacinth (*Hyacinthus orientalis*), shown here—winter aconite (*Eranthis hyemalis*), and snowdrops (*Galanthus* spp.).

have a lot more room for bulbs than you realized. Fortunately, it's not too late to shop for a few more! Or, plan to take pictures of your beds and borders next spring, so you'll know ahead of time just where your new bulbs are going to go, and you'll save lots of time hunting for the ideal bulb buddies next fall.

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In sunny sites, the spaces between the crowns of clump-forming ornamental grasses—such as prairie dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*), 'Karl Foerster' feather reed grass (*Calamagrostis* × *acutiflora*), and moor grasses (*Molinia* spp.)—are perfect places to add daffodils. Once they start growing, they tend to fill out quickly, so you don't have to look at "empty" space very long.



Hostas are excellent partners for spring bulbs in sites that get some shade in summer. The new growth of hostas usually isn't a garden feature until mid- to late spring, after the earliest bulbs—such as snowdrops (*Galanthus* spp.) and Siberian squill (*Scilla siberica*)—are done flowering, but often in good time to complement later kinds, such as mid- to late-season daffodils, tulips, and 'Gravetye Giant' summer snowflake (*Leucojum aestivum*), which is shown, above, with *Hosta* 'Mostly Ghostly'. The expanding hosta leaves then do a terrific job spreading out to cover the yellowing bulb foliage. Ferns, too, make excellent bulb buddies in shady settings.





Long-stemmed bulb blooms, like those of many lilies (opposite) and alliums (above), tend to look best proportionally with more substantial partners. Buddies that are at least half of the flower height when the bulbs bloom do a great job of covering up the uninteresting parts of the bulb stems. Sturdy-stalked perennials and compact shrubs offer a bonus benefit: helping to hold up the beautiful bulb blooms—a great alternative to staking! Opposite: *Lilium* ‘Black Beauty’ needs a tall partner, such as giant fleecflower (*Persicaria polymorpha*). Above: In this meadow composition, drumstick allium (*Allium sphaerocephalon*) and blazing star (*Liatris spicata*) create a pleasing contrast of texture while sharing a common color.

Mound-forming perennials, such as catmints (*Nepeta* spp.), hardy geraniums (*Geranium* spp.), and upright sedums (*Hylotelephium* spp.), are marvelous matches for tulips and alliums. The fresh foliage of the perennials makes a beautiful background for the bulbs’ showy blooms, then goes on to fill the space once the bulbs are done. Top: ‘Spring Green’ tulip with burnet (*Sanguisorba tenuifolia* ‘Alba’) and ‘Autumn Joy’ sedum. Above: The large flowerheads of *Allium christophii* peek out among the broad leaves of *Rudbeckia maxima* and the groundcovering golden oregano (*Origanum vulgare* ‘Aureum’).