



Lowcountry Master Gardener Association

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BULBS FOR THE SOUTH

I noticed when I moved down here 10 years ago, I didn't see many gardens planted with bulbs. And I couldn't understand why. I love bulbs. I love them not only for the beautiful flowers they produce, but because even the most inexperienced gardener can successfully plant bulbs.

Even if you plant them upside down, the stems will make their way to the surface. If you plant some bulbs too shallowly, they will corkscrew with their roots until they find a depth they're happy with. If you don't fertilize them, that's OK because they bring their own food. Dying foliage returns nutrition to the bulbs to feed them for the following year. That's why dying foliage shouldn't be removed until it's really dead. True of Palms, too.

We're not going to talk about bulbs alone. We're going to talk about corms, tubers and rhizomes, too.

Bulbs, corms, tubers and rhizomes are all geophytes; that is to say they are herbaceous plants with underground storage organs.

One thing all geophytes have in common is that they all need a rest period of dormancy or semi-dormancy. If you plant geophytes in pots, don't leave them outside in the winter. They will be dormant and need protection from winter rainfall and cold. An unheated garage is fine for most.

Unless the climate in your area is similar to the bulb's native environment, you'll have to take extra steps to grow them in your garden. That's why, for example, northern gardeners have to dig up and store tender bulbs during the winter, and southern gardeners have to pre-chill some bulbs to trick them into blooming.

Bulbs in their natural setting are pretty self-reliant. Some types of bulbs can survive for decades with Mother Nature as their only gardener.

Almost without exception, bulbs require good drainage. Unless they are aquatic or swamp lovers, such as cannas, the bulbs will rot in waterlogged soil. If your soil is poorly drained, plant in raised beds or pots.

Big Bulbs normally show best when planted in groups of three or five. Smaller bulbs should be planted by the handful.



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If you're serious about making bulbs permanent additions to your landscape, do your homework. I highly recommend Scott Ogden's book, "Garden Bulbs for the South". It's almost essential for serious Southern bulb collectors.

Our southern climate doesn't usually provide enough the winter chill to meet the requirements of the most popular common bulbs..... tulips and daffodils. The newer hybrids and cultivars are less adaptable than the old fashioned or species types. Pre-cooling in your extra refrigerator can vastly broaden your selection. Even then, they often act as annuals. Left in the ground, the following year's bloom will be insignificant, foliage only or missing altogether.

But consider this; a huge number of bulbs are actually less expensive than annuals, and will often return for another season or two of bloom. Some nurseries will ship early in the season to allow you to pre-cool them. Some even sell pre-cooled bulbs.

While some of the old fashioned species tulips and daffodils lack the size and flashy colors of newer hybrids, they are nonetheless pretty and charming and we can grow some of these without too much extra effort.

Most of the stunning mass plantings of tulips and daffodils you've seen are composed of plants with one stem per plant, and one flower per stem and are usually discarded at season's end. Species Tulips and Daffodils are usually multi-flowered, multi-stemmed and shorter than the newer hybrids, and many are fragrant.

Daffodils belong to the genus *Narcissus*, named for the beautiful Greek sprite who was so enamored with his own image, that he stared at his reflection in a river until he perished. In pity, the Gods changed him into a nodding flower.

Commercial cultivation of **Tulips** began in the Ottoman Empire, not in Holland, and in the 1630's, during the Dutch Tulip Mania, a single tulip bulb, "Semper Augustus" fetched 5,000 guilders, the price of a luxury car today.

Many species tulips, the *saxatilis*, *clusiana*, *humilis*, etc., and daffodil species such as *triandrus*, *cyclaminus* and *bulbocodium* can perennialize if planted in the right spot. That being the spot in your yard that remains the coldest in the winter.

You can buy 25 of these species bulbs for \$8 to \$10.

I'd like to talk about some of the less well known bulbs.

Let's start with **Rain Lilies**. These are those charming little six petaled flowers are called Rain Lilies because a drenching rain will trigger bloom. Many of you know this is because rain collects nitrogen from the air. Many Rain Lilies are southern natives. Our little white *Atamasco* rain lily is usually available at the twice yearly Spring Island Native Plant Sale, Mail order sources offer dozens of cultivars which thrive in our hot and humid climate.



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The Christmas favorite, **Amaryllis**, or **Hippeastrum**, (Latin for "Horse's Star", who knows why) loves our climate. You're not limited to the boxed bulbs available at your local chain stores. You can find them with variegated blossoms, pink, green, white and coral ones, and butterfly shaped ones. Plant them in good soil with about a third of the bulb above the soil. They like their shoulders to show. Large bulbs hold enough fluid to survive some storage, so those on "after Christmas" sales are usually a good buy.

Crinums.....the quintessential Southern bulb. They're tough as nails. The clumps just get bigger and bigger and they will outlive you, so plan on a designated heir. The old favorite, 'Milk and Wine' can still be seen in old cemeteries and abandoned properties. Crinums are the perfect passalong plant. In fact, until recently, it was difficult to find them in trade. My friend, Alice Massey, once told a fellow Master Gardener, Jenny Staton that she had some Crinums to share if she would just come and dig up the clump. Jenny came armed with a shovel and trowel, and what she needed was a back hoe. "It was the size of a Volkswagen", she relates.

Some report that **Crocasmia** self seed all over the place. I've never had that happy circumstance. Racemes of funnel shaped bright red, orange, or yellow flowers are loved by hummingbirds.

Eucomis The Pineapple Lily The rosette of leaves looks kind of like the top of a pineapple. 3 to 4 foot stalks emerge from the rosette and the top 8 or 10 inches is covered all around with small fragrant flowers. Sort of like a bottle brush.

For years I called them ChimChimCherree along with Mary Poppins. **Chin-cher-in-chee** is also known as Ornithogalum and Star of Bethlehem. They do best in pots here and are very popular in flower arrangements, lasting a long time..

Hymenocallis -Spider Lily Somewhat resembles the open trumpet of a daffodil, but with long whiskery tendrils spaced around the rim. They're kind of weirdly beautiful. They tend to sulk for a year before they will bloom, mark where they're planted and be patient.

Scilla Peruviana An absolutely gorgeous semi evergreen plant with grapefruit sized spheres of electric blue flowers in late spring. Like most Scillas, deer don't like them.

Leucojum.....Summer Snowflake. These are one of the few bulbs which don't require winter chill to give reliable bloom. These charming little white bells have green dots at the tip of each petal. They will bloom in late winter and early spring. They're very inexpensive, so plant lots.

Galtonia Summer Hyacinth These are a bit pricy, but you don't need many to make a statement in your garden! 4 to 5 feet high spikes of nodding white flowers bloom in late summer.



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Lycoris... Surprise lily or Naked Lady.... so called because foliage has disappeared before the single stalk appears topped with a tumble of whiskery flowers. Very dramatic.

Many plants are called **lilies**, --day lilies, calla lilies, spider lilies, gloriosa lilies, etc. but none of these are lilies at all. True lilies are in the family Liliaceae and their bulbs are very different from most other bulbs. They never actually go dormant, they don't have the protective outer skin, and they are composed of scales. Don't buy those mesh bags you find in box stores in the spring....they've already begun to dry out. They're not a bargain because they will never reach their full potential. A reliable source will send you lilies in barely moist sawdust, wood shavings or peat moss to keep them moist and protect them.

The one you're probably most familiar with is the **Easter Lily**. By all means plant it in your garden when Easter is over and the flowers are spent. But give it a spot way from other Liliaceae, if you have them, since forced lilies are subject to viruses. They also need to acclimate to their natural bloom cycle...which is not Easter.

There are some lovely native lilies, but they're rarely available in the trade. And if you see them in the wild, --please don't disturb them unless they're in the direct path of an oncoming bulldozer. They're all in peril of becoming endangered.

Formosa Lilies Multiple White trumpet shaped blooms on 4 to 5 foot stems in late summer. If you start them early from seeds, they sometimes bloom the first year and will self seed thereafter if they're happy.

Tiger Lily is probably the most reliable of the spotted lilies, It blooms happily for several weeks in the summer as long as they are protected from the hot afternoon sun. This particular lily sets tiny black bulbils about the size of a pea in the axil of the stem and leaf, which can be planted and will come to flower much faster than seeds.

The beautiful and fragrant Oriental lilies are much too delicate to survive here. Other than the old favorite, "Stargazer" sold in pots and already blooming, you don't see many Oriental lilies down here.

There has been a huge flurry of activity in the cross breeding of different types of lilies; quite a feat since so many produce pollen at different times.

The most successful of these experiments resulted in the **Orienpet**, a cross between Orientals and Trumpets. These have proved to be hardier than either parent and less subject to disease. Even these are short lived here in the South. Unless they're lifted and refrigerated at summers end, they will gradually shrink and be gone in two or three years.

The beautiful '**Silkroad**', one of the very first Orienpets, is in the Lily Hall of Fame. When I first saw the lily, about 20 years ago, I was just awestruck. It was the most beautiful flower I had ever seen. It was outrageously expensive, and I was barely able to afford just one, but I had to have it.



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Now it can be had for five or six dollars. Still a pretty price!

There are only one or two so called Climbing Lilies,--the most familiar is the **Gloriosa rothchildiana**. It's a tuber and has one of the most exotic blooms in the plant kingdom. You'd think it would be finicky as the dickens to grow, it's dead easy and comes back reliably every year.

Aztec Lilies (Sprekelia) look like large, exotic red orchids, but have a much easier culture, enjoying areas with dry soil and arid climates,--both hard to find here in the Lowcountry. That being said, if you can meet its requirements in a spot in your yard, they will do well here. These, too, do well in pots stored in the garage over winter.

Peacock Orchid...., Gladiolus murielae or callianthus formerly known as **Acidanthera**, This late summer blooming exotic, nocturnally fragrant bulbs are becoming rare in the trade.

Can be grown in constantly moist soil with lots of fertilizer. They mustn't dry out, so are best in pots.

The Parrot Lily is the cousin of the alstromeria found in supermarket flower kiosks. This small, multiflowered, plant will grow vigorously here in moist soil and partial shade.

Tuberoses.....These are the most elegantly scented flowers and the fragrance is the basis of some very high end perfumes such as Fracas and Chepres, and in Madonna's perfume "Truth or Dare" perfume.

Tuberoses have a colorful history. They were discovered in Mexico by Cortez. The Aztecs cultivated and used them in some of their more gruesome rituals. Cortez managed to annihilate the Aztec civilization, but these flowers made their way to France via a missionary returning from the Indies.

Plant in late winter or early spring and you'll be rewarded with deliciously fragrant and exotic flowers mid to late summer. Be sure and feed them often and they'll reward you with many offsets. Planted offsets often won't flower the first year. Whether in the ground or in pots, they need a dry period, so wait until the foliage dies and lift them and let them dry for a few days before storing them in peat moss, sawdust or vermiculite.

A meadow in England or Scotland filled with bluebells is sublime. But their climate is the antithesis of the Lowcountry's. However, **Spanish Bluebells** (Hyacinthoides) are quite wonderful here. Be lavish and plant them in drifts. They're inexpensive and multiply.

And those beautiful **Calla Lilies**, those most elegant and regal of all flowers. Not only are they beautiful, but some of the leaves of some will be streaked with the color of the flowers. The cultivar "Passion Fruit" has this habit and they're just stunning! Callas make very long lasting cut flowers, too. Like any other cut flower, the shorter the stem, the longer lasting the bloom.



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They're usually purchased in pots, but they're too expensive to just throw away at seasons end. The rhizomes can be lifted and stored like dahlias. Just wait until they're finished blooming, and the foliage dies down a bit. Cut back the foliage and lift the rhizomes. Wrap in newspaper and store in an airy paper box in the garage, or anywhere above freezing. If they're still in pots, just overwinter them in your garage, but add a bit of water from time to time so they don't dry out.

From Brazil, **Blue ginger**, which is not a true ginger, is a lovely summer flower. A tender perennial, take it outside for the summer....it's worth the effort to bring it inside for the winter.

Caladium Showy plants you've probably only purchased in pots. These have historically been shade plants, but some of the new ones will withstand quite a bit of sun. You can overwinter them in their pots or lift like Callas. If you do have them in the ground, you can take a chance with just mulching them heavily and they will often make it through the winter. They are warm season plants, and generally won't emerge from dormancy until both the weather and soil are quite warm, usually May or June.

Oxalis is perhaps too well known in the Southern garden, where it can self seed so prolifically as to become a pest. There are so many beautiful species, however, it's hard to begrudge them garden space.

And don't forget the kitchen table, either. Fall is the time to plant **shallots** and **garlic**, both of which can be obtained at your local supermarket. Plant the bulbs in loose, organically enriched soil, with the tops of the bulb about a half inch below the surface. Fall planting will give the bulbs time enough to form a good root system without sending up surface growth until spring.

In mid to late summer, when the foliage has died down, lift bulbs and let them cure in a dry airy place for a couple of weeks, then store and use. If you want to braid the garlic, do it before the foliage is too brittle.

Lemon Grass is a rhizome which can form a clump 3 feet wide and tall by season's end. Will die back in winter but returns in the spring.

Don't forget the spring planted onions and leeks. Even culinary ginger can be successfully raised here.

The world of gingers is huge,--to big to go into now. But let me say that there is a ginger for every garden. They're low maintenance, trouble free, and long lived. There's even a ginger called 'shampoo ginger', the cones of which, when squeezed, emit a substance the commercial people call awapui, and will, in fact, shampoo your hair!

New cultivars of aroids, many of which are referred to as **Elephant Ears**, are coming on the market every year. Some with black, purple or red stems or leaves, some that will get as big as a garden shed. My Alocasia "Portodoro" is in that category and it's stunning. Huge shiny green leaves with raised veins and ruffled edges. It clumps and will make offsets, but it doesn't run.



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Alocasias are the ones with shiny leaves that point upward, are usually pretty well behaved, but the **Calocasias**, the ones whose matte finished, arrow shaped leaves point downward are greedy thugs, and once planted in your garden, reproduce by both underground and above ground runners that root wherever they touch. They would continue to spread to Charleston if they could an unimpeded path. Don't plant them directly in your garden. Even if you put the pot in the ground in a "pot hole", the roots will find their way out through drainage holes. They make fabulous container plants, but caveat emptor.

And these are just some of them!

Lunch and Learn 2012 Presentation