

Caring for Tender Perennial Bulbs

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One of the rituals of fall is planting spring flowering bulbs. It is also time to pay special attention to tender perennials.

In the fall when nighttime temperatures are consistently between 40 and 50 degrees, is the best time for planting spring flowering bulbs. The most common varieties of these include daffodils, crocuses, tulips, grape hyacinths, snowdrops, and hyacinths.

Planting these bulbs in the fall allows for root growth. The changes in the bulb prepare it for proper growth and flower development. Generally, a bulb should be planted at a depth three to four times as deep as the bulb's height. Plant only healthy bulbs – those that are firm to the touch, and be sure to use cleaned gardening tools when planting.

While planting spring flowering bulbs is part of the gardener's fall regiment, those perennial bulbs that are not hardy enough to sustain themselves through the winter, should be removed from the ground and stored properly so they can be replanted in the spring.

These bulbs include caladiums (and elephant ears), tuberous begonias, dahlias, (non-hardy) gladiolus, canna, and calla lilies.

Caladiums should be dug up when the foliage dries back, just before frost sets in. Carefully lift the tubers out of the soil and place in a warm, dry place for curing (usually seven to 10 days) to remove the surface moisture. Place the tubers in layers between dry vermiculite, peat moss, dry sand or sawdust in a sturdy box. The box should be stored in a cool (about 50 degrees), frost-free area.

Those tuberous begonias grown in containers can be brought inside to enjoy through the winter months. Those planted in landscape beds should be dug up after a killing frost. Cut the tops back to two inches and air dry the roots for two to three weeks in a warm location. Place them in a box or sack filled with sphagnum moss or vermiculite in a cool (45 to 50 degrees), dry location.

After the first light frost, cut the tops of dahlias back to three to four inches, then carefully lift the tubers from the soil, leaving as much soil attached as possible to prevent breaking the fleshy roots. Air-dry them for a few hours and carefully remove the dried soil. Pack them in boxes upside down (to ensure any water remaining in the crown drains out) in boxes with vermiculite and store in area with 35 to 40-degree temperatures.

Gladiolus corms should be dug when the foliage begins to fade. For two to three weeks before storing, cure them in a warm room in an area where air circulates. Store in nylon bags and hang in an area (35 to 40-degrees) which allows air circulation throughout the winter months.

After a killing frost cut the stems of canna back to about three to four inches, then carefully dig up the rhizomes and let dry in a warm spot for one to two weeks. They do not require covering and can simply be placed in shallow boxes and stored in an area with 45-50-degree temperatures.

After the foliage of the calla lilies has been damaged by frost, cut the tops about two inches above the soil line. Dry the rhizomes in a warm, dry location for one to two weeks. Store in vermiculite, sawdust or peat moss in a frost-free area.