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## STATE~BY~STATE GARDENING

No More Boring Spring Borders  
by Eva Monheim - posted 11/09/11

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**Spring-blooming bulbs fill in the otherwise flowerless perennial bed with tufts of fabulous foliage and flower color. If your perennial border is boring until May, add some bulbs now — fall is the time to plant them.**



This colorful border features spirea (*Spiraea japonica* 'Magic Carpet'), pheasant's eye daffodil (*Narcissus poeticus* var. *recurvus*), blue grape hyacinth (*Muscari armeniacum*) and daylily (*Hemerocallis* sp.).

**H**istorically, perennial borders were garden beds that typically highlighted late spring, summer and fall bloom, while other areas of the garden, such as woodlands, focused more on early spring bloom. Now, gardeners can expand their sophisticated styles by incorporating late-winter- and early-spring-blooming bulbs into the classic perennial border. Planting spring-blooming bulbs in September or October will extend next spring's seasonal interest.

With a multitude of choices of bulbs on the market, your border can take on an entirely new visual appeal. Bulbs are best used to fill in the voided areas until the blooming perennials create their later season

spectacle. Bulbs fill in the otherwise flowerless perennial bed with tufts of fabulous foliage and flower color. When the bulbs begin to fade, their yellowing foliage is soon obliterated by perennials such as peonies and asters. Even low-growing woody shrubs work well to enhance this multi-seasonal appeal in the border.

This is also a good time to plant spring-blooming bulbs because in the fall, it is easy to find the gaps in between the fully mature perennials. The perennials are at their maximum size now. Where are the openings? Where would you like to see more color and early green growth in the spring? Selecting and planting spring bulbs now will help you to fill those gaps.

You might also consider dividing larger perennials right now. This will open up new gaps in the bed for additional bulb diversity and spacing.

When choosing bulbs consider both the bulb's foliage and flower type — this can enhance colors from the later-emerging perennials. For example, gray-blue foliage can enhance golden foliage. Large, bright, shimmering flowers — like tulips — can enhance everything around them. Tulips' wide strappy foliage curls and can add a ribbon effect to the garden. Or, for example, the structurally vertical stems of fritillaria can add a sense of architecture to the garden against the fuzzy foliage of early emerging catmint or lamb's ear.

As you plant your bulbs, you will have to imagine how they will look when they emerge and bloom. However, seeing the perennial border in this new context will refresh your interest in the garden and provide a conversation piece for welcomed visitors.

### **Alone Or in Mixed Groups?**

Bulbs can be planted in large 8-to-12-inch holes either as a solitary group or with other mixed bulbs for large visual bursts of color. Or, plant bulbs in solitary holes dotting the garden in random or orderly patterns. Selecting low-growing bulbs as well as tall bloomers gives the garden a visually layered look that creates dimension and excitement. Bright colors will also enhance the otherwise dull perennial foliage as it emerges from the ground.

### **Quick Tip**



The double daffodil (*Narcissus* 'Ice King') puts on a great show in the border.



Wood hyacinth (aka Spanish bluebells) *Hyacinthoides hispanica* has lustrous foliage and clean white flowers.

When planting, place the largest bulbs in the bottom of the hole and the smallest at the top.



Peonies (*Paeonia sp.*) will quickly mask the surrounding ground while the tulips (*Tulipa sp.*) provide color in the interim.



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