



# Patriotic Gardens: Bulbs for a Red, White, and Blue Spring Garden

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## A Statewide Garden Theme

Virginia Cooperative Extension developed five America's Anniversary Garden™ publications in 2007 to help individuals, communities, and groups mark America's 400th Anniversary with a signature garden planting. The signature gardens have red, white, and blue color schemes. In 2026, the publications were reviewed and revised to help individuals, communities, and groups mark America's Semiquincentennial. These publications are useful for creating patriotic-themed gardens.

## Why Plant a Bulb Garden?

Whether you garden on a large piece of property, on the balcony of a condominium, or on the rooftop of a building, one of the easiest ways to have showy spring flowers is by planting bulbs. Unlike planting trees, shrubs, and annuals, which immediately have an aesthetic effect in the garden, incorporating spring-flowering bulbs requires advanced planning because they need to be planted in the fall or early winter to reap the rewards of flowers the following spring.



Figure 1. A spring display of spring-flowering bulbs featuring red, white, and blue colors.

Three options for adding bulbs to your outdoor garden:

- Containers (including window boxes)
- Regular flower beds or landscape/lawn areas
- Special raised berms following a method developed by Brent and Becky Heath, owners of Brent and Becky's Bulbs, Gloucester, Va. (Found on page 6.)



Figure 2. Individual pots of tulip 'Blue Base', daffodil Horn of Plenty, and hyacinth 'Blue Jacket'.

## Shopping for Bulbs

Most garden centers and retailers of plants and gardening supplies sell spring-flowering bulbs in the fall, but their range of bulb types and cultivars (varieties) may be limited to either common cultivars and/or small-sized bulbs. In addition, bulbs placed on display (vs. held in a cooler until shipping) may dry out, rot, or sprout prematurely. Buy the largest bulbs you can find and afford in order to be assured of healthy growth, good flower production, and re-blooming in subsequent years. Most bulbs should be plump, clean, and firm. For the widest selection, highest quality, and largest bulb sizes, consider mail-order shopping. Place your order early in the summer to ensure you receive your desired selections.

## When to Bulbs

Spring-flowering bulbs are best planted once the soil temperature at a depth of 6 to 12 inches has dropped to 60°F (usually after the first heavy frost). If you buy or receive your bulbs before the soil cools down from summer, store them in a cool, well-ventilated, and dry area (50° to 70°F). Bulbs need to form roots before the soil freezes, so in the more northern and western parts of Virginia (hardiness zones 5-7), plant in October and November. In southeast Virginia (hardiness zone 8), plant in December.

You may wish to incorporate your spring-flowering bulbs into an existing **Patriotic Garden**. You can locate your bulbs where you will be removing your summer annuals. If you plan to replace your summer annuals with red, white, and blue fall and winter annuals such as pansies, ornamental kale, and cabbage, you can plant bulbs into the spaces between your fall and winter annuals. You can also wait and plant bulbs and fall and winter annuals at the same time. Bulbs can stay in place after they bloom and can be overplanted after spring with red, white, and blue summer annuals to continue a seasonal color transition in the same garden or landscape bed.

## Site Selection

The **Patriot Gardens** bulb combinations selected by Brent Heath use daffodils (*Narcissus*), tulips (*Tulipa*), hyacinths (*Hyacinthus*), grape hyacinths (*Muscari*), and glory of the snow (*Chionodoxa*). Full sun (minimum of six hours of direct sunlight) is preferable for all of these bulbs, although daffodils, grape hyacinths, and glory of the snow will tolerate partial shade. If tulips and hyacinths are planted in too much shade, they tend to produce long, weak stems with smaller flowers.

The amount of shade an area receives generally increases as spring progresses. For bulbs that bloom in early spring, before deciduous trees leaf out, planting under trees may be acceptable. You often see daffodils naturalized that way in wooded areas. If, however, you use mid- to late-spring blooming bulbs, it's best to plant them in full-sun areas.

Regardless of exposure, select a well-drained area. All of the selected bulbs are cold hardy across Virginia and should establish and bloom for many years. Tulips do not tolerate the heat in southeastern Virginia and generally need to be replanted every year.

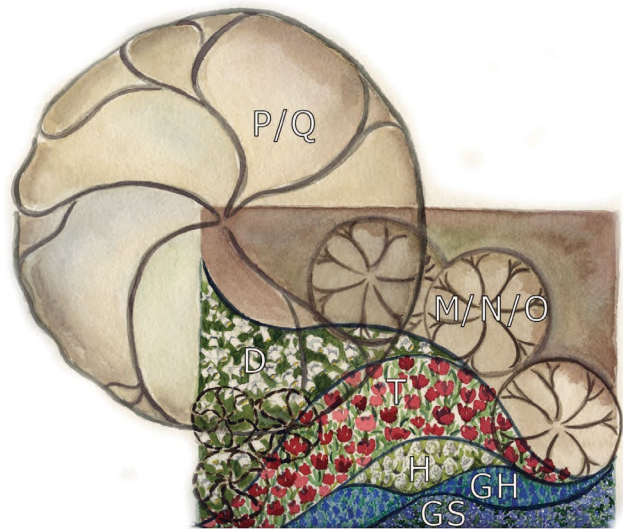


Figure 3. An 8-foot-by-10-foot garden bed showing how early-blooming bulbs planted among later-blooming perennials can start the garden season with a vivid display of red, white, and blue. D-daffodil 'Barrett Browning'; T-tulip 'Red Paradise'; H-hyacinth Carnegie; GH-grape hyacinth Blue Spike; GS-glory of the snow; M-redtwig (red osier) dogwood; N-bigleaf hydrangea; O-Virginia sweetspire; P-fringetree; Q-dogwood

## Garden Design

There are two basic ways to design bulb gardens relative to bloom time. Bulbs can be sequenced to spread their bloom over an extended period of time, or they can be selected to bloom simultaneously (at the same time). To achieve the desired **Patriotic Garden** red, white, and blue effect, coordinate your bulbs so they bloom simultaneously.

Bulbs planted in the ground can go into beds, or in some cases, directly into your lawn for a more naturalized effect. Whether in the ground or in containers, bulb heights can be staggered, going from shorter bulbs like grape hyacinths and hyacinths in the front to taller daffodils or tulips in the back, or they can be layered with one type of bulb coming up through another (such as taller red tulips coming up through smaller blue grape hyacinths and white glory of the snow).

Plant bulbs in masses instead of individually or in lines. Use large numbers of bulbs (at least 10 to 12 of each kind) for the most dramatic effect. It is often better to plant fewer types of bulbs in larger quantities than to plant only a few of several types of bulbs.



Figure 4. A combination of white daffodils and hyacinths, red tulips, and blue hyacinths.

## Soil Preparation, Planting Techniques, Depths, and Spacing

Bulbs should be planted in well-drained soil. If your soil is very clayey or sandy, consider adding compost or another organic amendment to the entire area. Incorporate the amendment 12 to 18 inches deep. A lightly acidic soil, with a pH of 5.5 to 6.5, is best for bulbs.

Holes for one or a few bulbs can be dug with a hand trowel, a hand or stand-up tubular bulb planter, dibble bar, or an auger powered by a portable drill. Follow the recommended depth given in our suggested bulbs chart, but if your soil is sandy, plant a bit deeper. If you are planting in a bed or want to layer different types of bulbs together, consider digging trenches or excavating an entire area (putting the removed soil into buckets). Bulbs can be set in place, and then the soil dumped over the top.

A healthy, sizable bulb has enough stored food to allow it to grow well the first year. Fertilizer can be added at planting time by mixing it into the soil below where you will place the bulbs. Do not place fertilizer at the bottom of individual bulb holes to avoid root burn as roots grow. Incorporate a slow-release fertilizer containing approximately equal parts nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium (such as 9-9-6 or 10-12-10) at the rate recommended on the bag, or approximately 1 tablespoon per square foot. Avoid using water-soluble fertilizers like 10-10-10, as they are fast-release and will not support the bulbs throughout the growing season. Bone meal is often recommended, but it can attract animals that could dig up the bulbs.

Daffodil bulbs and leaves are poisonous to most insects and animals, and hyacinth bulbs repel pests. However, chipmunks, voles, mice, woodchucks, squirrels, and

other animals will forage for and eat newly planted tulips, grape hyacinths, glory of the snow, crocus, and a majority of other bulbs you might add to your **Patriotic Garden**. To protect your susceptible bulbs, consider spraying them pre-plant with bad-tasting repellents such as Deer-Off (Havahart Products) or Ropel (Burlington Scientific Corp.). Another approach is to surround each bulb with a handful of sharp, crushed gravel or a sharp aggregate product like VoleBloc (Carolina Stalite Co.). You can also group bulbs in wire-mesh bulb baskets or cover the bed with chicken wire.

Most bulbs are planted to a depth of three to four times the bulb's height. Bulbs are usually spaced three times the bulb's width apart (see the suggested bulbs chart for recommended numbers of bulbs per square foot). Place the bulbs with their "noses" (the pointed tops) up and their roots or flat stem/root plate down. Cover with half the soil and water to settle the soil around your bulbs and eliminate air pockets. Then cover with the remaining soil and water again.

## Watering, Mulching, Fertilizing, and Other Maintenance

Water your bulbs after planting to stimulate root growth, and at least once a week in the spring if rainfall drops below 1 inch per week during the growing season. Remember that some of your bulbs may be planted 6 to 8 inches deep, so be sure to water until the soil is wet at least that deep. If you have an automatic irrigation system, avoid planting bulbs in areas where irrigation is programmed for daily watering to avoid rotting your bulbs or increasing the chances of fungal diseases.

To conserve soil moisture, reduce weed growth, and buffer temperature extremes, apply two inches of mulch over your beds using materials such as pine needles, pine bark, shredded hardwood, or recycled hulls from buckwheat, cocoa, peanuts, or rice. Avoid excessive mulching, especially over tulips, because thick mulch layers create warm winter habitats for voles. Do not layer weed barriers, such as black plastic or woven/nonwoven landscape fabrics, under your mulch – they will interfere with the growth of bulb leaves and flowers. If you want to use a pre-emergent herbicide in combination with your mulch to prevent weeds, be sure the herbicide label states it is safe for use around bulbs.

As mentioned above, fertilizer can be incorporated into the planting bed soil before layering your bulbs. If you do not incorporate fertilizer preplant, you can top dress (apply to the top of the soil before mulching) with a slow-release fertilizer. Top dressing every fall will help to ensure good flowering the following spring. Scatter

the fertilizer over the soil or mulch, gently rake it in to make good soil contact, and water.

Do not remove the leaves from your bulbs after flowering occurs. The leaves are vital for producing food that will be stored in the bulb for flowering the following year. Let the leaves die back naturally, and once they are yellow or tan, they should pull away from the bulb easily. You can remove the spent flowers from your bulbs to prevent seed formation that will drain energy away from the next year's flowers. This is more important for tulips, because their nectar attracts pollinating insects, than for daffodils or other bulbs that are rarely wind or insect pollinated.

### Other Spring-Flowering Bulbs for the Patriotic Garden

You certainly are not limited to the list of bulbs we have suggested here. Other good choices for spring gardens and containers include ornamental onions (*Allium* – blue, white), windflowers or anemones (*Anemone* - reds, whites, and blues), Indian hyacinths or quamash (*Camassia* – blue, white), crocus (*Crocus* – white), snowdrops (*Galanthus* - white), Spanish bluebells/wood hyacinths/scillas (*Hyacinthoides* – blue, white), star flower (*Ipheion* – blue, white), Dutch and dwarf iris (*Iris* – blue, white), snowflakes (*Leucojum* – white), striped squill (*Puschkinia* – blue, white), and bluebell or squill (*Scilla* – blue). As you can see there are lots of bulbs for blue and white flowers, but for the best reds, stick with tulips.



Figure 4. Blue anemones



Figure 5. White snowdrops.



Figure 6. Red tulips, blue iris, and white crocus.

## Planting Bulbs in Outdoor Containers

If you live in an apartment or condominium and do not have space to plant a **Patriotic Garden**, you can easily plant an attractive spring-flowering bulb garden in an outdoor container. Container bulb gardens are also lovely accents for front porches, decks, patios, business entrances, and along sidewalks and streets.

Whether you use a lighter-weight plastic container or a heavier terra-cotta container, be sure it has drain holes. If you have neighbors below, be sure to put a saucer under the container to catch water that drains through the container. For variety, you might want to plant red and white flowering bulbs in a glazed blue container.



Figure 7. An illustration of a container with red tulips, white daffodils, and blue muscari.

Use Brent Heath’s suggested bulb combination for your container planting. You will want simultaneous, not sequenced, flowering to have the greatest effect. Follow these steps suggested by Brent and Becky Heath:

- Select a weatherproof container that is tall enough to provide adequate depth for your bulbs. Allow 3 inches of height per layer of bulbs; if you follow the bulb combination in the chart, you will need a container at least 15 inches deep. Select a container with a wide base to prevent it from blowing over or tipping over once the bulbs begin to grow.
- Place a few layers of newspaper at the bottom of your container to keep your potting soil from falling through the holes, and consider covering it with an inch of gravel if mice and voles can climb through the drain holes. Do not make the gravel layer more than an inch thick because, contrary to popular belief, several inches of gravel will not improve drainage but rather shorten the column of potting soil through which water can drain.
- Put a few inches of coarse potting soil (such as a ground pine bark/sand mix or a bark/compost mix – the latter will hold more water than the first) over the newspaper/gravel layer. Place your layer of deepest bulbs into the container and cover them to their top with more potting soil. (If animals may be a problem, consider treating your bulbs with a repellent as mentioned earlier.) If your potting soil is dry, water to



Figure 8. A red, white, and blue container with tulips, hyacinths, and daffodils.

moisten it and settle the bulbs before adding your next layer of bulbs. Continue layering potting soil and bulbs until your top layer is completed. If you plan to recycle your bulbs to a garden after they flower, top dress them with a slow-release fertilizer. In the colder parts of Virginia, consider topping your layered bulbs with an inch of gravel to protect them and keep them from heaving out of the container while they root into the soil. Water the pot well to encourage root growth. Water every few weeks to keep the potting soil moist but not wet.



Figures 9a and 9b: Bulbs laid out for layering (left), and the first layer – the daffodils – ready to be covered (right). Note the blue ceramic pot used to help reinforce the red-white-blue color scheme.

- For rooting and flowering to occur, your containerized bulbs need to be chilled at temperatures between 32° and 48°F for 12 to 16 weeks. Place them on the north side of a building, in an unheated garage, in a cool basement, or in an old refrigerator. If left outside, place the containers in leaf-filled plastic bags or even in old coolers (but be sure to open the lid every few weeks to vent ethylene gas produced by the bulbs) to insulate them.
- Once the chilling period has occurred and the danger of hard freezes is past, move the containers stored inside to a sunny outdoor location when you see leaves and bulbs beginning to emerge. For containers stored outdoors, begin to uncover them to encourage leaves and buds to emerge.
- Bulbs grown in containers rarely grow well for multiple years due to the challenge of providing sufficient nutrients. Better to recycle them to your garden or that of a family member or friend and start with new bulbs the next year. They are ready to transplant after they bloom and after any chance of a hard freeze has passed.

### Raised Berms for Heavy Clay Soil and “Rodent Proofing”

A big challenge when bulb gardening is preventing voles from eating the bulbs. Spraying your bulbs preplant with a foul-tasting commercial repellent, such as Mole-Med (Mole Med, Inc.) or Ropel, can help, but to really outwit these rodents, and to provide an excellent, well-drained substrate, particularly if your soil is heavy or clayey, try building a raised bed following this method developed by Brent and Becky Heath:

- Select a partial to full-sun landscape area where a raised berm can be a focal point, a partial screen, or a feature to control foot traffic. If creating a raised area of one to two feet high is not practical or aesthetically acceptable, consider excavating several inches of soil from your selected area and then starting your layering.
- Cover the existing soil with two inches of sharp gravel.
- Cover the gravel layer with six inches of mature compost (compost that has been aerobically processed for at least two to four months).
- Place your bulbs on top of the compost layer, spacing them according to bulb type.

- Spray your bulbs with the above-mentioned repellents for extra protection and allow them to dry.
- Cover the bulbs with 2 inches of sharp gravel, then 4 to 6 inches of additional compost, soil, or sand (sand is cheaper than compost and is more weed-free).
- For winter protection, cover the entire bulb berm with six inches of organic mulch such as pine needles or shredded pine bark. Avoid straw due to weed-seed contamination. In the spring, remove some of the mulch once the bulb leaves and flowers begin to emerge.
- Besides preserving your bulbs and improving drainage, another benefit of this method is no more digging individual holes – just layer and cover! Though bulb berms can serve as focal points in your landscape, creating one may be inconsistent with the appearance of your landscape. If so, consider excavating a trench several inches deep and then layering as above to reduce the berm’s above-ground height.





Figures 10 a-d: Brent Heath building a bulb berm surrounding an entry sign at the Hampton Roads Agricultural Research and Extension Center.

[Patriotic Gardens: Red, White, and Blue in Fall and Winter Gardens, Virginia Cooperative Extension publication 426-228](https://pubs.ext.vt.edu/426/426-228/426-228.html), (pubs.ext.vt.edu/426/426-228/426-228.html)

## Additional Resources

[Annuals: Culture and Maintenance, Virginia Cooperative Extension publication 426-200](https://pubs.ext.vt.edu/426/426-200/426-200.html), (pubs.ext.vt.edu/426/426-200/426-200.html)

[Perennials: Culture, Maintenance and Propagation, Virginia Cooperative Extension publication 426-203](https://ext.vt.edu/426/426-203/426-203.html), (ext.vt.edu/426/426-203/426-203.html)

[Tree and Shrub Planting Guidelines, Virginia Cooperative Extension publication 430-295](https://pubs.ext.vt.edu/430/430-295/430-295.html), (pubs.ext.vt.edu/430/430-295/430-295.html)

Heath, Brent and Becky. *Tulips for American Gardens*. Bright Sky Press, New York, N.Y.

Heath, Brent and Becky. *Daffodils for American Gardens*. Bright Sky Press, New York, N.Y.

[Brent and Becky's Bulbs](http://brentandbeckysbulbs.com) (brentandbeckysbulbs.com) (additional selection, cultural information, and color pictures of bulbs).

## Acknowledgments

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## Other Publications in the Series

[Patriotic Gardens: How to Plant a Red, White, and Blue Garden, Virginia Cooperative Extension publication 426-210](https://pubs.ext.vt.edu/426/426-210/426-210), (pubs.ext.vt.edu/426/426-210/426-210)

[Patriotic Gardens: Developing A Statewide Corridor and Entrance Enhancement Program, Virginia Cooperative Extension publication 426-211](https://pubs.ext.vt.edu/426/426-211/426-211.html), (pubs.ext.vt.edu/426/426-211/426-211.html)

[Patriotic Gardens: Native Plants, Virginia Cooperative Extension publication 426-223](https://pubs.ext.vt.edu/426/426-223/426-223.html), (pubs.ext.vt.edu/426/426-223/426-223.html)

Table 1: Suggested Bulb Selections for a Patriotic Garden for gardens and beds (Selected by Brent Heath)

Flowering Time	Type	Suggested cultivar or species	Height	Bulbs per square foot	Planting depth	Color	Miscellaneous
Early to mid-spring	Tulip	'Promiss'	10"-12"	4-5	8"-10"	Red	Double flowers with tinges of green on the outer edges
Early to mid-spring	Daffodil	'Barrett Browning'	14"-16"	4-5	5"-6"	White	Brilliant white with an orange-red center cup
Early to mid-spring	Grape hyacinth	'Alida'	6"-8"	10-15	2"-3"	Blue	Larger than most other <i>armeniicum</i> types
Early to mid-spring	Hyacinth	'Carnegie'	8"-12"	4-5	4"-6"	White	Spike of fragrant, dense flowers
Early to mid-spring	Glory of the Snow	<i>Chionodoxa forbesii</i>	5"-10"	6-10	2"-3"	Blue	Spray of 5-10 stary flowers per stem, white center
Early to mid-spring	Tulip	'Red Paradise'	10"-14"	4-5	8"-10"	Red	Black heart
Early to mid-spring	Daffodil	'Abba'	14"-16"	4-5	5"-6"	White	Very fragrant, 3-5 double florets per stem, orange flecked center
Early to mid-spring	Grape hyacinth	'Manon'	4"-8"	10-15	2"-3"	Blue	Very pale blue blooms
Mid- to late spring	Tulip	'Parade'	20"-22"	4-5	8"-10"	Red	Very large, yellow base, inside yellow-edged, black heart
Mid- to late spring	Daffodil	'Mount Hood'	15"-17"	4-5	3"-8"	White	Bloom matures to pure white
Mid- to late spring	Grape hyacinth	'Big Smile'	5"-7"	10-15	2"-3"	Blue	Larger florets than other <i>muscari</i>

Table 2: Suggested Bulb Selections for a Patriotic Garden for small containers (under 20" diameter) (Selected by Brent Heath)

Flowering Time	Type	Suggested cultivar or species	Height	Bulbs per square foot	Planting depth	Color	Miscellaneous
Mid- to late spring	Tulip	<i>Tulipa linifolia</i>	3"-4"	10-15	4"-6"	Red	Bright red with a black base; opens wide in sunshine; red-edged leaves
Mid- to late spring	Grape hyacinth	'Blue Spike'	6"-8"	10-15	3"-3"	Blue	Loosely formed, fragrant double flowers; larger and longer lasting
Mid- to late spring	Grape hyacinth	'Siberian Tiger'	4"-6"	10-15	2"-3"	White	Clusters of green buds open into pure white flowers

Table 3: Suggested Bulb Selections for a Patriotic Garden for large containers (over 20" diameter) (Selected by Brent Heath)

Flowering Time	Type	Suggested cultivar or species	Height	Bulbs per square foot	Planting depth	Color	Miscellaneous
Mid- to late spring	Tulip	'Pretty Woman'	14"-16"	4-5	8"-10"	Red	Long-lasting, cardinal red petals with a dark center
Mid- to late spring	Daffodil	'Thalia'	12"-14"	4-5	5"-6"	White	Fragrant, 2-3 nodding flowers per stem
Mid- to late spring	Grape hyacinth	<i>Muscari latifolium</i>	4"-6"	10-15	2"-3"	Blue	Light blue fragrant top flowers, dark violet on the bottom

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