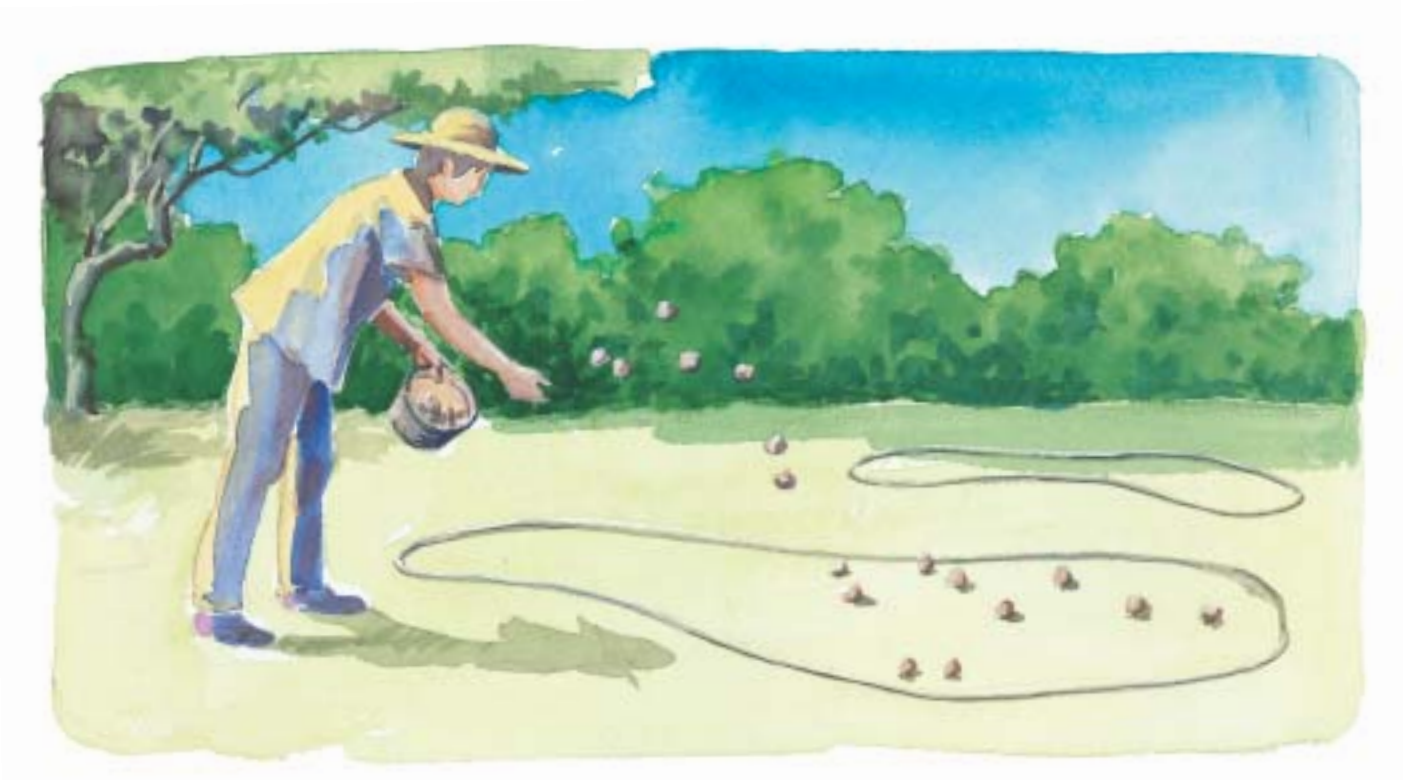


Planting Bulbs for a Meadow Effect

How to plan, plant, and care for bulbs in order to achieve a naturalized look. Wayne Winterrowd

Natural Meadows have pools of plants broken by grassy patches, so lay out your planting areas similarly. Then scatter bulbs gently, adjusting the spacing to get a look that's dense but not congested.

STUDENTS OF ENGLISH LITERATURE may or may not find Wordsworth's great poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" full of meaning. But any gardener on earth will have responded in a particular way to his "host of golden daffodils." For all gardeners seem to have an almost elemental need for daffodils, and not just for a few. A "host," that's the idea. One simply cannot have too many. (Well, if you are buying the latest hybrids in deep pink or with a lime-green cup at $50 or more a bulb, and spending the children's milk money, then you are having too many.) Fortunately there are enough daffodils to be had cheap, and in enough variety, to satisfy even the greediest gardener. To that may be added the fact that daffodils—unlike tulips—are usually sturdy, no-fuss plants, in fact, true perennials. They are not particular as to soils, accepting with equanimity almost anything from fertile sand to heavy clay. A sprinkling of granular, vegetable-garden fertilizer—10-10-10 or the like, put on just as the blossoms fade, will surprise them by its generosity, but is not positively required. As long as their simple needs are met, they can be counted on to reappear, increase, and bloom in ever-greater abundance for many years.

With the love of daffodils there comes, at some point in the evolution of every gardener, the impulse to plant them in the lawn. It is a romantic notion, especially when spring is far away and a long winter lies ahead in which to dream. And indeed, when spring does finally come, and daffodils first pierce brown sod and then burst forth in all their sunshine colors, the

effect is cheering, to say the least. And brief. For soon enough, the daffodils fade, their foliage grows coarse, and the rank grass around them makes hauling out the mower a daunting task. Not only daunting but also damaging because mowing the lawn means mowing down the daffodil foliage, and for both daffodil and gardener, in the long run that is not a good thing.

Most gardeners understand the mechanism by which daffodils and other long-lived, bulbous perennials grow and produce flowers. This year's foliage nurtures the plant and also produces a tiny, embryo flower in its heart. Indeed, if you could be so cruel as to dig up a plump daffodil bulb in August, just as the foliage has finally withered, and cut it open, you would see the tiny flower in there, waiting for the following spring to enlarge and appear above ground. So if you remove a daffodil's foliage before it matures, you get no flower the following year; and if you KEEP doing that, you will eventually get no leaves or bulb, for you will simply have starved the plant to death.

The solution to this problem is to plant your bulbs in those areas of turf that can be left to high grass without being too much of an eyesore or inconve nience. Many properties in America often have too much lawn, and a part of it—the back section, say, behind the garage, an outer bit of lawn where you planted apple trees, or the area below the drive—might well be allowed to turn to meadow. That would suit daffodils splendidly, provided it is in full sun, which they require.

Laying out a naturalized planting is simple so long as you remember a couple of essential points. The first is that the human hand, left to its own devices, instinctively craves symmetry. So if you take a bag of daffodil bulbs out into a meadow and start to plant, come spring, you may be surprised by the fact that all the bulbs are quite evenly spaced, one from another, and possibly even in squares or rectangles. To avoid this phenomenon, gardeners are often advised to toss handfuls of bulbs up into the air, and plant them where they land. Despite the attractive abandon suggested by this method, it has several problems: First, if your grass is even moderately tall, you may not find the bulbs you tossed. Second, a bulb is a living thing, which means that it can be hurt. (Drop an onion—another sort of bulb—onto a kitchen floor, and then put it back into the bin. Soon you will have a rotten onion. You get the idea.) Third, most gardeners like to plan effects, if only for good culture, and not just have them happen. Bulbs that are tossed might be too close together, too far apart, to satisfy the dream in the gardener's mind. So

A Planting Plan should aim for irregular, long ovals, wide in the middle and tapering at the ends. Some drifts should be larger, some smaller. And if you draw a line down the center of your paper, most should cross that line at their tips, or occasionally, a third of their total length.

Best Daffodils for Naturalizing

Though most daffodils will settle down into rough grass or meadow and reappear yearly, certain sturdy old reliables are considered best for naturalizing. These are among the most stalwart.

'February Gold': Medium height. Intense, dandelion-yellow flowers. Early, as its name suggests.

'Ice Follies': Medium height, flat-faced, opening primrose-yellow and fading to white. Early- to mid-season.

'Golden Harvest': Just what its name implies. Vivid yellow, mid-season, first choice for Wordsworth's "host of golden daffodils."

'Mount Hood': An elegant, long-trumpeted white, actually the color of fine pearls. Mid-season.

'Binkie': Medium height, mid-season, with a hint of mango in the cup, against a frill of cream-colored petals. Hard to get, but worth it.

'Empress of Ireland': A joke on Queen Victoria, who, for obvious political reasons, was never allowed to assume that title. Tall, elegant, ivory-white, large flowered, mid- to late -season.

'Mrs. R.O. Backhouse': Sometimes wrongly offered as 'Mrs. R.O. Packhouse'. A clear, light-apricot cup, probably the sturdiest of the "pink" daffodils. But late season, and so best planted a little apart, and not among early- or mid-season varieties. *—W.W.*

do this: Survey a patch, toss your bulbs low to the ground—sort of like bowling—and then adjust them a little, this way and that, to your satisfaction. Then start planting.

Whether you plant by thousands, or hundreds, or tens, it is always good to leave a few open, grassy spaces —"air," as it were—between colonies of bulbs. Your impulse may be to have a solid sheet of color, and natural meadows may present this picture, but most natural meadows are in fact a patchwork, richly flowered where the soil was good, not so much where poor. Also, after symmetry, we crave contrast. So pools of daffodils interlocked with pools of vernal grass will usually seem more satisfying than daffodils alone.

Your eye may be keen enough to imprint the open stretch of grass with the drifts of daffodils that will eventually occur. But if it is not, you may wish to draw the space on graph paper, pencil in colonies, and translate the result back to your meadow. Try to draw in irregular, long ovals, wide in the middle and tapering at the ends. Remember, however, not to make your design too regular. Some drifts should be larger, some smaller. And if you draw a line down the center of your paper, most should cross that line at their tips, or occasionally, a third of their total length. When you have a design that pleases you abstractly—or if you choose to pass up this step altogether—you are ready to plant.

Spring Pairings of daffodils and fruit trees (or most any spring-flowering tree) can provide striking compositions depending on your choice of colors.

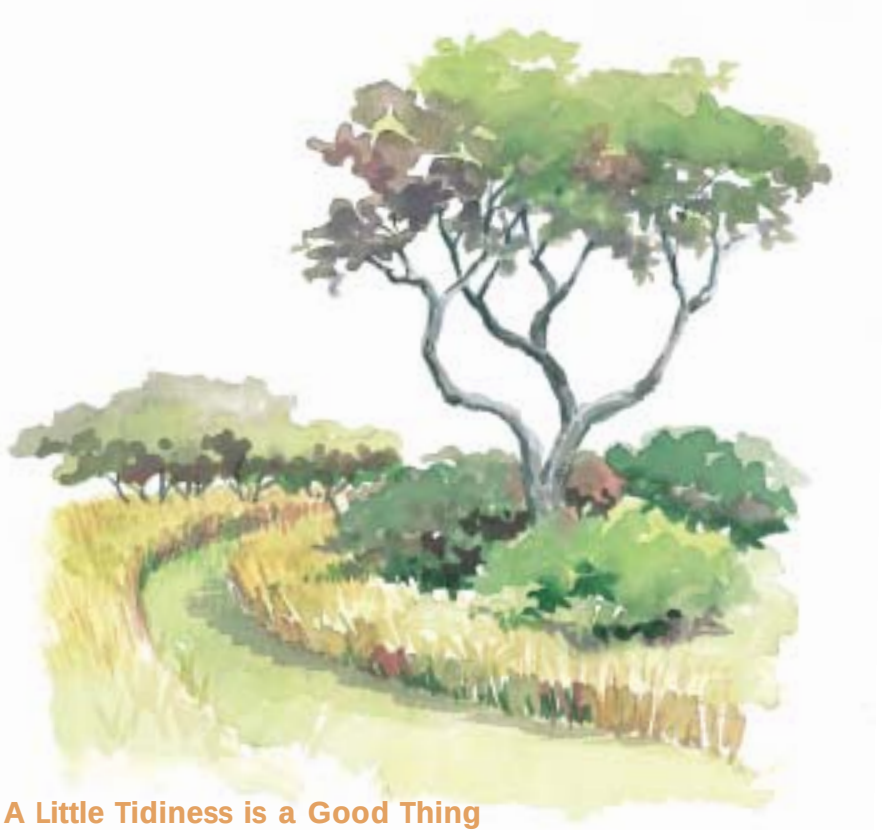
Mow the grass as close as possible, using a string trimmer if it is already high. That will make every bulb easy to see and to plant. Then, on the bare thatch, scatter the bulbs. If you are working from a plan, use white clothesline or powdered lime to indicate planting areas. Do not scatter too many at a time, for planting them can be daunting, mid-way through. And always mark where you stopped planting, if you are called away to the phone, for you think you will remember where you stopped, but you won't.

Plant each bulb separately, at a depth of approximately twice its height. Some gardeners put commercial bulb starter, or a bit of granular garden fertilizer—10-10-10 or the like—into the hole. (Bone meal, which is often recommended, may be very weak in nutrients, and will certainly encourage skunks, raccoons, and even the family dog to dig up your bulbs.) If you add any fertilizer directly to the planting hole, however, be sure that it is well incorporated into the soil, and that there is an inch or so of plain earth between it and the bottom of the bulb, for the new roots burn easily when they come into direct contract with fresh chemical fertilizers. In the long run, it is just as effective—and certainly quicker—to scatter the fertilizer over a new planting and allow a winter's rains and melting snows to carry it down to the roots of the bulbs.

Once your daffodil meadow is planted, there is still a little more to do than simply sit back and admire. Neatness has been called "the great vice of American

To Mix or Not to Mix . . .

Gardeners differ on whether several (or many) daffodil varieties should be tumbled together and then planted, or whether separate varieties should be planted singly, in interrelated groups. There are valid arguments on both sides. A general mix is often cheaper, and for many gardeners, also, variety is truly the spice of gardening. They find it nice to have a riot of different things in bloom, and also nice to survey the crowd and pick out an especially pretty face. Other gardeners—and I am one of them—like to select what they plant, identify varieties in bloom, and keep records for the future of those that have done particularly well or are particularly pleasing. Many gardeners are unsettled also by the fact that mixes contain daffodils that bloom early, mid-, and late season, so that some reach peak bloom just as others have gone off, spoiling the general effect. They will therefore choose to plant single varieties in drifts, as if one naturally occurring form after another seeded into uniform colonies. A map identifying varieties can then be made for future reference, which is comforting, come bulb-ordering time. ***—W.W.***



A Little Tidiness is a Good Thing

A well-mown strip along the edge of a naturalized planting or even a path running through its midst creates a pleasing contrast to the informality of the meadow and shows dubious neighbors you didn't simply lose your lawn mower.

gardening." As a nation, we need to relax, and we all crave relaxation. But somehow, when things get out of hand, the national passion for Tidiness seems to take over, and we bring out secateurs, mower, rake, whatever, and have a good chop.

That being the case, this impulse to tidiness is well served by surrounding your "meadow"—which is by definition going to be a little out of your control, a little messy—with a verge of neatly mown grass, or perhaps even a meandering path through the middle of it. (Or, if your meadow is very large, a baseball diamond, a "Field of Dreams," in the center, even if you never played baseball in your life, and never will.) And if you chose, for example, to line your front drive or the space along the public road with naturalized plantings of daffodils, then, for a space of three or four feet, avoid planting them, and mow that three or four feet just as if it were the finest lawn, even golf course lawn. Indeed, wherever naturalized plantings meet the more civilized, the more controlled sections of the garden, here is the principle: Maintain an immaculate mown edge, or some other clear deliberated structure. That way, neighbors and other visitors will see what you are up to. And they will admire.

So will a crowd of other critters—toads, lizards, small rodents (who do not eat daffodils), bees, butterflies, and many lowly insects who are not particularly pretty, but on whom our ecology depends. Think, also, what a savings you will reap in lawn mower gas, and how nice it will be not to have that buzz in your ears. That will be all to the good. But mostly, think of the "host of golden daffodils," which, each spring, will be more abundant.

Replenishing Your Plantings

Say you have a long drive up to your house, or a sizable meadow above or below it, or a stretch along the public road, in which you want to add daffodils, in hundreds or even thousands (eventually), over a number of years. The question then is, How can you know, come bulb-planting time in autumn, where last autumn's planting—and last spring's display—stopped?

The first answer to that question is, don't wait until autumn. Spring-flowering bulbs, though usually planted from September to early November, can just as easily be planted while in growth, at any time after their flowers wither and before the foliage turns yellow. This is called planting "in the green."

So if you have a clump of overgrown daffodils, possibly of a treasured heirloom variety, take it up while the foliage is vigorous, split it apart, and plant it among existing daffodils, wherever the show is thin. Do this every year, for the daffodil show is an ongoing event.

Second: If you prefer to order new varieties of daffodils to increase your display, then also order a few dozen grape hyacinths. They are gentle, little blue things, blooming mid-spring, but among bulbs they have the distinction of producing their foliage in the autumn, at just about the time daffodils are usually planted. So if you put them in a ragged line at the end of where you planted last September, their foliage will tell you where to start up, come next year. They are very pretty in spring, also, but that's extra.

—W.W.