



Pick and mix

Now's the time to start planning for the spring by planting your bulbs, says Sir Roddy

IS IT really September already? It was May a moment ago. It must be an age thing. But what a good growing season we've had this year starting with that beautiful spring. The time has come to start planning ahead for the spring. The earlier you get in your spring bulbs, the better the results will be. Tulips, however, are about the only exception as planting them earlier can result in them becoming infected with 'tulip fire', a nasty fungus that can cause the whole plant to rot.

Plant daffodils, crocuses, snowdrops and winter aconites as soon as you can. Emulate Mother Nature and plant them in natural looking groups and avoid, especially, serried rows. If you have the space, plant around the base of a tree surrounded by lawn with mixed bulbs. Add snakeshead fritillaries, scillas and grapefruit hyacinths to the mix, perhaps a handful of each, depending on the space you wish to fill.

Mix all the bulbs together in a bowl and throw them under the tree so that they do not land too closely together. This will result in successive flowering starting with the winter aconites and snowdrops in February until early summer when the fritillaries flower. Remember, you will have to allow the foliage to die back before you can start to mow. Do not invest in a special bulb planter if you have stony soil or you are planning to plant where there are tree or shrub roots. It will prove a waste of money. Planting spring bulbs in borders can prove a mistake as they are easily dug up when moving herbaceous perennials or shrubs.

There's a lot of fun to be had with bulbs throughout the winter to cheer you on a cold and gloomy day. Many, like the 'paperwhite' daffodils, are easily cultivated, and I can never understand why people spend so much more when



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they are in bud or flower, potted up with a strip of fancy moss around their base. All you need do is to fill a bowl (the larger the better for best effect) with gravel, small stones or corks broken into small pieces to within one inch (2.5cm) of the rim. Pour in water so that it almost covers the top of the stones and place the bulbs, bought at your local market, on top. Vigorous roots will soon start to plunge downwards. The text books advice the addition of charcoal under the stones in order to keep the water sweet but I do not always find this necessary. Like all indoor bulbs they should be kept well lit in the cool for as much as possible to prevent them from

producing long, weak growth.

Delay no further the planting of hyacinths in bowls indoors.

Being reminded of Christmas as early as this is very annoying, I know, but a little forward planning will save you a lot of money on decorations at a time when we are all having to pull in our horns. You can create marvels from plants that you would normally add to the compost heap or burn. This is the month for dead-heading and cutting back after all, so keep the dead flowers of achillea, sedum and ornamental grasses and seed heads of opium poppy and honesty. Having hung them up to dry, they can be sprayed white, gold or silver to make a decorative centre piece for the table.

Collect fir cones over the next few months. Once dried and similarly sprayed they can be scattered on the Christmas table to give you a look you would normally have to dig deep into your pocket to buy.

Make a note to grow these plants next year, and plant a holly while you're at it.

If you had asked me if I liked dahlias about 20 years ago I would have made a face that looked as if I had a dog mess under my nose. Ask me about them now and I am wreathed with smiles. I have come to love and appreciate them for their long flowering season and the wonderful riots of colour they give right up until the first frosts. I don't think you can grow enough of them. They look just as good crowded together as they do planted hither and thither in the scheme of things. After a decade or so of mild winters when many of us got away with leaving tubers in the ground in the autumn, we got our fingers burnt after the last cold winter. I will be lifting my dahlia tubers this autumn. I am not prepared to take the risk. ■