

Growing Bulbs

[Mary Robson]

Hi, I'm holding a catalog, disguising whose catalog it is; one of the really best ways to learn about ornamental plants is to get as many good nursery catalogs as you can possibly order. They don't cost much, they are great reading, and the catalog is not only going to tell you what is a new type of plant coming up, but it often will give you really good care and management tips. We are going to talk about growing four particular kinds of plants that do well on both sides of the mountains. The first is the true lily. This is not a daylily, this is the *Lilium*, and what we have here is a batch of Lily. This says dwarf lily, *Lilium asiatic*, the Asiatic lily. You can see that they're dwarfed, this is their full height. They're planted here in the enabling garden and they bloomed in June. They are now dying back, and for those if you who are neat freaks; stop - do not cut the foliage off until it is completely down and brown. These are almost ready but what they have done is to recharge themselves by taking all of the nutrients out of those leaves and sending them down to the root. This is a lily from my garden, which is still green but has bloomed. It is still green because I didn't plant these until late May. You can plant true lily bulbs in the spring or in the fall west of the mountains. East of the mountains people generally try to get them planted in the early spring. I brought a lily bulb along for you to look at because there are a number of things that are very interesting about lilies. This lily bulb, this is dead, we have to sing a goodbye song to it, this bulb is gone. I have two things I want to show you about it. Notice that this is the bulb, it's a big one, the cause of its death shall not be mentioned - actually it was left in the wrong place at the wrong time, out of its bag unplanted.

But look what happens to a lily that has been planted, they grow roots above the bulb, isn't that interesting? They also grow roots below the bulb; this bunch of roots anchors the lily. This bunch of roots feeds and waters the lily. So when you are planting true lilies, anything within the genus *Lilium*, you will notice that the instructions on these say provided well-drained soil. They aren't kidding. If you put this in a clay where the drainage is no good, the thing will rot. They never really truly go dormant; they are related in this, being true bulbs they are related to daffodils and tulips, but they never stop growing. So when you want to plant a lily be sure you get local sources and do not leave them out of the ground as this one was - it was picked up for transplanting from last year and forgotten. I apologize to the Lily kingdom, because this one cannot survive being out of the ground the way it has been. Another thing that's amazing about lilies. So don't forget, they need ample soil above the bulb to make those special roots.

The other thing that a lily can do; this is so clever, plants are beyond clever, this particular one is also in Asiatic Lily. It finished blooming, when I trimmed the bloom off I

noticed that it had a bunch of what are called bulbils around the stem. This wasn't even in the ground, these were right up at the top of the stem, and if you get a really close look at this you'll notice this is starting to grow. With bulbils we're not talking about propagating all plants but with lilies if you see these interesting little bulbils growing on your lilies you can detach each one of them. Right now in the fall when they're ripe it's a good idea, plant them about a half an inch down in a row and they will grow each of them into a new lily plant. If you're feeling patient - it's going to be three or four years before these bulbils are big enough to show us much, but this is one of the ways that lilies have of keeping themselves going in the world. True lilies are absolutely great plants for our gardens on both sides of the mountains, just don't dig it up and leave it in the sun.

OK, one of the things that you will be doing as a gardener in the fall either east or west of the mountains is planting bulbs for spring bloom. We're fooling you because here's is this *Colchicum* again this is a spring leafing plant that looks like a spring bloomer. It is planted at the same time that you plant other bulbs in the fall but it blooms early. The rest of the things that we are likely to see, let's start with the crocuses. Here's the drill on fall planted bulbs. These are corms of crocuses and if you look at this particular one this is a little tiny crocus called *Crocus chrysanthus*. See this old corm? The way that crocuses renew themselves is to build a whole new shiny plant right above the old one. This is fantastic. It's one of the reasons that corm-type plants are often less expensive to buy because they're so eager to expand themselves. Here's one that has built, this is again crocuses, and these are planted in the fall; here's the old one and it has come up with three new corms on top of that old one. Each of these, if taken apart, you just break them off and don't feel shy, each of these if planted is going to form a new plant. This one is big enough to bloom, these may take two years to get to blooming size. This is going to be your very early spring crocus. What you need to keep in mind about hardy bulbs is; this guy needs almost thirteen weeks of cold weather in the ground before it's going to be ready to bloom. So what you do when you're planning your hardy bulb planting, that is crocuses, daffodils, tulips, hyacinths; think back to which one is going to bloom first and get those into the ground first. So as soon as your soil temperatures drop to about forty-five, it hasn't happened yet in western Washington, happens pretty fast in eastern Washington; plant them in cool soil - that is early September in eastern Washington or to the end of September and in western Washington you can plant crocuses and other spring bulbs between about the fifteenth of October to the fifteenth of December. I have planted them on Christmas Eve, but that was a mistake, don't do that - they grew fine but nobody in my family could understand what I was doing out in the garden on Christmas Eve, I was planting the last of the bulbs. So these are the crocus corms, this is a solid little thing and each of these I started with two last year and I'll be planting four this year. These are out of the ground

because I had them in a pot. You do not have to remove them from the ground after they bloom; I just brought these along for demonstration purposes. OK, so crocuses need at least thirteen weeks of cool in the ground. After the ground freezes they are OK, but they need to get their roots started before the ground freezes, that's why you have to watch the window for planting in eastern Washington.

Let's look at daffodils; these guys look a little wet but I hope not. Daffodils are probably the most useful, isn't that unpromising? I love bulbs. They are incredibly useful and in part because when they finish blooming in the spring they go dormant. You'll notice that these roots are not alive. I just took these out of a pot but they've been dormant all summer. They don't start to grow nice white roots until they get the fall rains, so one of the things you want to do is plant them at the right time; water them when you plant them because you want to get those new roots started. These are completely done for. These bulbs, which are very healthy, will put out a batch of beautiful new white roots started by water. Once you plant them don't let them dry out. If you had a real strange fall dry spell and you had planted your bulbs, be sure that you keep them watered because once they start growing they aren't going to turn around and say "Whoops, we're going to have to stop here." Here's another daffodil - this one is in its third year. It started out with one bulb and you'll notice that the daffodils essentially put out a small bulb right beside themselves; they are beside themselves, but that makes them bulbs which often will perennialize very nicely in the garden and they'll come back year after year after year. And this one also is dormant. Remember that poor sad lily we looked at? These guys actually do go dormant. I could throw these into a corner of the garden and forget about them; it wouldn't be desirable but I could, and they would still be solid and sound and ready to plant.

This is a little bit about storing these bulbs. You'll notice I've brought along a brown paper bag. Brown paper bags are not interesting by themselves, but they are a great way to keep your bulbs going if you have to store them. I use a bag like this, which is the previous bag from a shipment of bulbs, or a brown paper lunch bag. Here's the reason; bulbs as you notice this was a tulip, the tulips can be planted as late as December. This is a tulip bulb, it's one that's already grown for one year. You notice it has no roots at all, it's solid. Tulips and other spring bulbs, about seventy five percent of that weight is water, and you're saying, "What, how could that be?" The way that you will find out that they are mostly water is what happens if you leave them in a plastic bag. A lot of stores have the unfortunate habit of providing plastic bags for fall bulbs. If you aren't going to plant right away and you leave them in the plastic bag you may come back and find them covered with blue mold; it's a penicillin mold. That's because they start sweating in a plastic bag, so the take-home lesson about fall bulbs; tulips like this, daffodils, crocuses, hyacinths, if you're going to store them use a bag that breaths.

And these are just lunch bags, they're fine, you don't have to put more holes in them. I just close it lightly, write on the bag what you've got in it because you will never remember, you're going to open the bag and go, "Hmmmmm." You can stop there I've got a pen. OK, imagine I have written on this bag "tulip, Orange Emperor", that's what it is, this is the early blooming tulip. They last very well; they're not always perennial but they last very well. You will find that it is going to make a difference when you're selecting tulips in particular, what the species is, and sort of another one of those lessons is you may have to know the genus and the species of an ornamental plant in order to know how it behaves. This one is to *Tulipa fosteriana* and it lasts more than one year in the garden; some tulips don't. If you want tulips that are really perennial, the small species tulips like *Tulipa batalinii* will last in a nice dry place in the garden for years.

So we'll be looking a little bit more at some of the different types of tulips and how you grow them. This is tulip Orange Emperor in very good health, ready to plant. The only reason these are out of the ground, by the way, is I have them in a pot and I dumped them out for the purpose of showing you. If you have them in the ground or even in a pot and you want to leave them year round, that is fine. Make sure they do not get too much summer water, make sure they're in well-drained soil. These tulips originate in the Atlas Mountains where they get no summer water at all, so spring blooming bulbs are a great addition to a waterwise garden because when you want to stop watering they're going to go dormant and say, "We're done, next time we see some water in the winter we'll get our leaves and our roots going again." But they're completely dormant in the spring. That is also true of a number of spring blooming perennials like bleeding heart, oriental poppies, if you grow them in your garden you might look and discover that you have a hole where that plant used to be but you haven't killed it hurray, it has simply gone dormant. Things that bloom in the spring tend to take care of themselves in the hot summer by knocking off for a while, and again, the most important thing about spring blooming bulbs is they need at least thirteen weeks of cold soil. That's forty-five degrees and below before they are ready to bloom. If you find a bag of bulbs like this under the kitchen sink in February, you say to yourself, "Should I plant those?" They will have lost some health, and they may not bloom on time, but they would be happier in the garden than in the bag, just don't expect regular behavior.