

# Interesting and Lovely Bulbs to Try

For creating a cheap and cheerful splash of colour, winter bulbs are a universal favourite, but when dominated by commercial favourites the display can sometimes look a little bit predictable. Dig a little deeper, however, and you will find range of specialist suppliers with all sorts of choice plants to explore.

With flowers that grow so willingly from humble beginnings, bulbs are addictive. The obsession starts innocently enough: perhaps the catalyst is a pack of daffodils picked up with the groceries, followed by a vivid pink cyclamen, or the vintage charms of a forced hyacinth. But with pleasure and performance almost guaranteed, temptation then sets in.

Late-night internet searches and Sunday morning catalogue trawls reveal daffodils to be almost infinitely diverse and snowdrops to have cult status. Meanwhile, the tender *Cyclamen persicum* on the windowsill introduces relatives that extend way beyond the common and hardy *C. hederifolium* and *C. coum*.

When planting bulbs that expand your repertoire, choose varieties that suit the conditions that are available. Avoid (in the beginning, at least) those delightful but awkward customers that demand extra drainage, the shelter of a glasshouse, or their pot plunging in sand. Instead, seek out new species and cultivars that are perhaps a bit harder to find, but are still easy to grow. Research their preferences and persist; with a bit of know-how and experimentation, any one of these might be a rewarding success or a surprise solution for a tricky spot in the garden.

The choices are extensive: autumn-flowering *Sternbergia lutea* loves the sun and bucks the trend

for those more accustomed to snowdrops, while nerines like to bake by a warm wall. Colchicums and autumn crocuses also like a bright location, while *Galanthus reginae-olgae* and cyclamen will take a little shade – as may *Hesperantha*, somewhat surprisingly. *Cyclamen mirabile* makes a dainty feature in autumn, given good drainage and humus, while *C. pseudibiricum* adds glamour in early spring.

When it comes to early narcissi, the smaller species, such as cultivars of *N. bulbocodium* and *N. cyclamineus*, tend to arrive ahead of the pack, as does *N.* 'Rijnveldt's Early Sensation'. With crocuses, look for species such as *Crocus chrysanthus* and *C. tomassinianus*, which are convincingly winter-flowering.

## Finding out more

There are a number of organisations that count bulbs among their interests, and which often operate internationally. These include The Alpine Garden Society, The North American Rock Garden Society, The Scottish Rock Garden Society (or 'Scottish Rock', as it is affectionately called), and the Hardy Plant Society. Many of these organisations offer shows, information, and seed exchanges, while some also run tours and expeditions, providing opportunities to see bulbs growing in the wild and to take part in conservation activities. Look for specialist nurseries and local garden with winter open days, where advice may be on hand and there will be unusual and interesting plants to buy.

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**Clockwise from top left** Pagoda lilies such as *Erythronium revolutum* 'Knights Hayes Pink' enjoy a partly shaded site with humus-rich soil. *Narcissus cantabricus* is an early-flowering hoop-petticoat daffodil. Autumn-blooming *Sternbergia greuteriana* (pictured) is less hardy than its more common relative, *S. lutea*. Beautiful, airy *Tulipa turkestanica* is a species tulip that flowers in early spring.

