

Article for Garden Myths Partner Program

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Title:

Garden Myth: Spring Bulbs Should Be Planted After the First Frost

This seems to be a common myth, but even if it was true, why would a gardener in cold climates want to wait until the weather is cold and the ground is frozen? Maybe southerners invented this myth and are silently laughing at us?

Think about spring bulbs in nature and the ones you planted in previous years. They grow leaves and flowers in spring and then rest for the summer. Very little biological activity occurs in summer, but internal processes are getting the bulbs ready to regrow. As temperatures cool in fall, they make roots and then leaves, which grow until they are just below the surface of the soil. They sit there during winter so that they are ready to get an early jump in spring.

A recent review had a closer look at what planted bulbs do in late summer; [Spring Bulbs – When is The Best Time to Plant](#)? It is clear from the pictures that in zone 5, many common bulbs start making roots by August. By mid-September new shoots are developing. This type of growth provides the bulb a good head start on making a large root system before the cold of winter sets in. The plant is now ready to grow in early spring.

There may be a good reason for planting spring bulbs later; they can get a Fusarium fungal infection. Each type of bulb has its own species of Fusarium, but they behave similar to one another. The fungus grows best at warmer temperatures, so planting late fall when it is cooler will reduce the incidence of Fusarium, resulting in healthier bulbs in spring.

Where does Fusarium come from? It can live in soil and if the soil is highly infected, it may remain infected for 10-15 years – this is not clearly understood yet. Planting the same type of bulb, annually, in the same spot can create an area where the bulb does not do well because they get killed or damaged by Fusarium.

Fusarium is frequently found on new bulb purchases and is one reason why it might be a better idea to plant new bulbs later, once the soil is cooler.

What about bulbs planted in previous years – can they get Fusarium? I have not seen a clear answer to this. Since the fungus lives in soil it is certainly possible, but it seems as if the major source of the fungus is handling during the production process. Once you have clean bulbs and plant them, it is less of a concern.

When should you plant spring bulbs? For root growth and bulb development, early is better. For disease control, late is better. The best time is a compromise between the two. Dr. William Miller, from Cornell University made this suggestion, “Soil temperature for planting should be under 15C (59F), and for tulips

13C (55F) would be better. Below 9C (48F), root growth is reduced as temperatures get cooler. Root growth for most spring bulbs is nearly zero at 0-1C (33F).” In zone 5 the best time to plant is October.

If bulbs are not planted on time, they can be planted until the soil is frozen solid. As Miller says, “late planting is better than not planting.” If you still have bulbs after the ground is frozen, plant them in pots and keep them in a cool spot. They will flower in spring and can be planted out the following year.

Written by Robert Pavlis, author of two books, , [Garden Myths](#) and [Building Natural Ponds](#).

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