Bulbs: Part II
Questions and Answers

Periodically, a column will be dedicated to answering questions from readers. This is when call-in or write-in questions are used to create an informational piece. Its purpose is to familiarize larger numbers of readers with a specific topic.

What is the difference between bulbs, corms, tubers and rhizomes?

Are these the underground parts of tulips, lilies, crocus, anemones, daffodils, iris, dahlias and like plants?

Indeed, they are!

The general term 'geophyte' is used to include all of the above. The geophytes are what the plants use to store nutrients and water.

Gardeners typically use the word *bulb*, not geophyte, as a kind of “blanket word” that includes all of these. Technically, this is not correct.

In my October 26th article titled “Spring Bulbs” Part I, (www.maderatribune.com, see Master Gardener) This writer testified that a crocus is a bulb.

Here is my confession.

A crocus grows from a corm not a bulb.

What would happen if I suggested a certain was *person* a bulb, when in fact, the person was a corm?

Could I then assume a blast of complaints?

One might think so, right?

Fortunately, writing about gardening, hummingbirds and wildflowers and things of that nature are fairly safe subjects.

Next question, please.

What is a bulb and how do I differentiate it from a corm, tuber and rhizome?

True bulbs, if cut in half vertically, reveal the components you would find in a bud, namely, flower and leaves.
Here are some general guidelines:

- Bulbs are layered much like an artichoke. Onions, tulips, lilies, and narcissus are true bulbs.

- Corms are solid, enlarged stem bases: examples are anemones, crocus and gladiolus.

- Rhizomes are swollen stems that grow horizontally typically underground and send up leaves and flowers at intervals. Iris are the best-known rhizomes.

- The term 'tuber' is applied to any plant with underground storage parts that does not fit the above categories. Common tubers are potatoes, dahlia, and gloxinia.

What do I do with my bulbs after they bloom?

**Do not cut down the leaves.** After the flower is finished blooming, all the food that was stored in the bulb is exhausted. It is through the leaves that food is sent down to the bulb to replenish it, so that it can grow more flowers for next spring. If you cut back leaves too soon after the bulbs have bloomed, you'll reduce the number of flowers in coming years. **Fertilize plants immediately after their flowering ends.** Apply a complete fertilizer, containing nitrogen, phosphorous, and potassium to the soil where the bulbs have been planted (around the base of the leaves). 

**Allow the bulbs to dry out** (just quit watering) after the foliage begins to turn yellow. Most spring bulbs prefer dry soil during summer.

Dig, divide and **replant the bulbs when crowded** (usually every three or four years). Do this if the blooms are getting small. Small blossoms indicate that the bulb doesn't have room to grow and get large.

Apply a light application of a high-nitrogen fertilizer just as the bulbs begin to grow in spring.

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