

Academy Garden Club Thymes

A NEWSLETTER FOR THE MEMBERS OF THE ACADEMY GARDEN CLUB OF LENOX

MARCH 2024

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Horticultural Column Spring-Planting Bulbs

By Harriet Wetstone

How strange the weather feels, dark and wet, and so unseasonably warm. I wrote this yesterday, and last night I got caught in a mini blizzard! The weather ups and downs, coupled with my having been at the Connecticut Flower Show, have me itching to get into the garden.

One of the very interesting things at the flower show was a display of bulbs to be planted in the spring. To my surprise, one was a collection of alliums to plant at the end of April for blooming this year. I had no idea you could plant alliums in the spring for blooming a few weeks later!

Another spring planter was a Japanese bulb called WonderFlowers, *Mirabilis Jalapa*. Said to be deer resistant, willing to flower in sun or shade, and once established, flowering for the entire summer. It seems to be wonderful indeed! The illustration showed a dense border of flowers in a variety of bright primary colors. It turns out that the Japanese WonderFlower is the common four o'clock! I have such a strong memory from my childhood of these beautifully fragrant flowers that opened late in the summer afternoon that I used for doll dresses! I am struck that a seemingly exotic plant turns out to be so nostalgically familiar! The bulb of the WonderFlower is dark and long and narrow, to be planted vertically with the thinner end down. Planted this spring, it might only bloom a few weeks, but will bloom all summer next year. It also self-sows, so it might need to be kept from getting overzealous!



Caladium is yet another spring planter. I think the Caladium is a fabulous foliage plant, most often used in containers, and happy indoors or out in summer shade. I love the variety of colors and textures. Native to tropical Americas, and therefore not a perennial for us, Caladium is a tuberous herbaceous plant in the arum genus of flowering plant in the family Araceae, and they are closely related to *Alocasia*, *Clocasia* and *Xanthosoma*, all plants with wonderfully decorative leaves. Caladium, though, has an exquisite fragility that these others don't have. In its native habitat it is an understory plant, and therefore happy in dappled shade and moist rich soil. There are 14 species ranging in colors from all white to wonderfully textured mixtures of reds and greens. And occasionally, it produces a flower, like the flower of the *spathiphyllum*, or peace flower. Watch out though, all parts of this plant contain calcium oxalate crystals and so are considered poisonous. Not only shouldn't you eat it, but also be careful as it can irritate skin should you happen to be sensitive to it.

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The Calla Lily (*Zantedeschia aetheopica*,) is also a bulb in the arum genus (Araceae). I associate calla lilies more with florists than with my garden, but they are another spring planting bulb. The calla lily (calla means beautiful in Greek) is not a lily, but I won't hold that against it. They are good for planting in fragrant drifts, like to be in full to partial sun, like to be near water and don't like to dry out, and otherwise need very little care. They also do very well in containers. In tropical zones, Calla lilies self-propagate so much so that in coastal California and in places in Australia they are considered invasive. For us, though, they need to be dug up and brought in with the dahlias. Calla lilies grow ten to sixteen inches tall and come in a wide range of colors, from yellows to oranges, pinks and purples, reds, and, of course, white.



Finally, **Gladioli** are planted in the spring. Gladioli (Iridaceae family) are native to Africa, Europe, and the Mediterranean. A genus of about 300 species, they have been intensely hybridized. There are now hardy gladioli which, especially when planted in well-drained soil, are said to be hardy down to zone five. These tend to be red, and not so tall (perhaps a good thing) and are available from several bulb companies. Although, interestingly, Gladioli grows not from bulbs, but from corms which are covered with a fibrous papery skin. Both bulbs and corms are geophytes which is a term for perennial plants with underground food storage organs and include tubers and rhizomes as well as bulbs and corms. True bulbs are divided into layers (think onion), while corms are solid units.

Thanks to the spruce.com; gardenia.net; [garden therapy.com](http://gardentherapy.com); www.dutchbulbs.com, and more.

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