

## BIG ideas for small plants

# Easy bulbs to buy in growth

Although the majority of bulbs are sold in the dry state in late summer and autumn, there are a number which are better bought as growing plants in pots, in winter or spring. This group includes plants with bulbs, corms, tubers and other swollen parts.

## But why is it better to buy some bulbs in growth?

- Some have no protective skins, so dry out very quickly in storage and may give poor results e.g. Dogs Tooth Violets (*erythroniums*), fritillarias, lilies.
- Some do not re-establish well when stored dry for sale. e.g. snowdrops (*Galanthus*), snowflakes (*Leucojum and Acis*), windflowers (*Anemone blanda*), Winter Aconites (*Eranthis*), Cyclamen-flowered Daffodil (*Narcissus cyclamineus*), Wood Anemone (*Anemone nemerosa*), Cyclamen.
- Some normally have perennial roots, so should not be dried off at all - e.g. trilliums, lilies, cyclamen.
- Some begin to produce roots in midsummer, so are growing underground before the normal bulb-selling season e.g. some hoop-petticoat daffodils (forms of *Narcissus bulbocodium* and *Narcissus romieuxii*), Star of Bethlehem relatives (*Ornithogalum*), choicer grape hyacinth relatives (*Muscari*) and trilliums.
- Some vary so much in leaf patterns and/or shapes that it is advisable to see what you are buying, and choose the ones you like best e.g. cyclamen, trilliums, erythroniums.
- Some have a wide range of flower colours and sizes, so again it is best to see the plants in growth e.g. cyclamen, trilliums, *Erythronium denscanis*. Some cyclamen have scented or unscented flowers.



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### When is the best time to buy?

The best time to buy the bulbs covered in this leaflet is when they are in leaf and flower. This can mean as early as January for some Snowdrops, or as late as May with some trilliums and lilies. Buying in this way gives you the chance to choose healthy growing plants with nice leaves and good flowers, in just the colours that you like best.



Some of these bulbs can be bought in the dry state, but if you are to get good results, it is essential to buy them as soon as they become available in nurseries and garden centres. This can be as early as late June. Some lilies, *Erythronium* x 'Pagoda' and *Fritillaria meleagris* are examples, but this only applies to a few 'cheap and cheerful' plants.

### When is the best time to plant?

If you avoid periods when there are frosts, or after heavy rains, it is usually safe to plant your bulbs straight away. In periods of frost or heavy rain, it is better to place the pots in an unheated greenhouse or cold frame, or even at the back of the garage or in an unheated room in the house, until conditions improve.

### How to plant.

- This is simplicity itself. Simply dig a hole slightly larger than the pot, in a suitable place in the garden. With your fingers across the lip of the pot, invert it and gently tap the rim on some firm object, until the whole contents of the pot slide out (it usually comes out in one piece!) Turn the contents right way up and lower it into the planting hole, then gently fill in the hole with the excavated soil and firm very gently. Finish off with gentle watering.



*Fritillaria pyrenaica* 'Lutea'

- If the contents of the pot falls apart, don't panic, just lower the bulb or bulbs into the hole and carry on.
- If there are large roots spiralling round the base of the pot, gently teasing out the root tips will help the roots to penetrate your soil more quickly.

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## Recommended bulbs

The bulbs listed below are usually readily available and will grow in a wide range of soils, although care given to location and soil preparation may give even better results. Sellers are usually very happy to give you advice on this subject.



Anemone nemerosa

### Anemone

Our native Wood Anemone (*A. nemerosa*) has creeping underground stems and a wide range of flower colours: white, pink, lilac, blue and will tolerate deep shade. The Windflower (*A. blanda*) with an even wider colour range, needs full sun to give its best performance. Both will tolerate poor, dry soils, but will also do well in better soils.



Cyclamen hederifolium

### Cyclamen

Invaluable garden plants. *C. coum* can be had in flower from mid-December to the end of March, with flower colours from white through shades of pink to magenta. *C. hederifolium* (the ivy-leaved cyclamen) will tolerate very poor, dry soils and full sun or deep shade. Flowers white and shades of pink, from August to October. Both species have a wide range of leaf patterns, and will seed down if left to their own devices. Not for very heavy soils. Mulch with garden compost when dormant (June or July). Do not mix these species in the same bed as *C. hederifolium* will smother its smaller relative after a few years.



Eranthis hiemalis

### Eranthis hiemalis (Winter Aconite)

Easy. Can be good in very heavy soils. When clumps form, lift, divide and replant as the flower petals fall. *E. x 'Guinea Gold'* is expensive, but has superior, buttercup yellow, glossy flowers and dark foliage.

### Erythroniums (Dogs-tooth violets)

*E. denscanis* has many leaf patterns and flower colours ranging from white through pink to purple. *E. californicum* 'White Beauty'; the name speaks for itself. Wonderful marbled leaf patterns and creamy flowers like a miniature turkscap lily. *E. x 'Pagoda'* is a very readily available and vigorous hybrid with marbled glossy leaves and good yellow flowers.



Erythronium 'Pagoda'



E. 'White Beauty'

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*Fritillaria pyrenaica*

## **Fritillaria**

Some species differ so much in flower colour and markings that buying in flower is a good plan, even if a little more expensive. *F. pyrenaica* is available with flower colours from yellow, through brownish, to very dark shades. Height about 30 cm. It looks 'special' but has done well in a sunny spot. *F. meleagris*, our native Snakeshead Fritillaria, is taller, with chequered flowers ranging from white through dusky pinks to deep pinky-purples. Will often seed about in the garden. Better in moist soil, or with some shade.



*Galanthus atkinsii*

## **Galanthus (Snowdrops)**

In addition to the common snowdrop (*Galanthus nivalis*), two very good cultivars are *G. x 'Atkinsii'*, a strong grower with bold white flowers, and *G. 'Magnet'* with flowers dangling on long stalks. Both are adaptable and increase well if lifted and divided every three years or so, as the leaves yellow after flowering.

## **Leucojum (Snowflakes)**

Showflakes differ from snowdrops in having all six petals the same size. *L. vernum* (spring snowflake) flowers February – March. Height about 10 cm, flowers white with green or yellow spots near the petal tips. *L. aestivum* (summer snowflake) flowers April – May. Each 30 –40 cm stem bears several flowers on separate stalks.

*L. autumnale* (autumn snowflake); dainty white fairy-flowers produced in September on wiry 10 cm stems. It looks lovely and fragile but is tough and hardy. All do best in humus-rich soils, but will tolerate drought. The latter has recently been renamed as *Acis autumnale*, but will probably continue to be sold for many years under its previous name.

## **Narcissus cyclamineus.**

The cyclamen-flowered daffodil. A real cutie! Although from very wet locations in the wild, it will tolerate poor, sandy soils in the garden, especially if placed where it will be in shade until after mid-day. It will also grow in grass. Let the seed fall around the plants; it will usually produce flowering bulbs in three years.



*Trillium grandiflorum*

## **Trillium**

The North American trilliums are mainly woodland plants in nature, but most are very adaptable in British gardens. Their three-petalled flowers will add a 'different' look to your garden. *T. grandiflorum* (white flowers), *T. luteum* (yellow flowers) *T. cuneatum* and *T. decumbens* (usually maroon-purple) are the most readily available. *T. kurabayashii* (similar colour) flowers freely in the AGS garden in Pershore. Buy in flower between March and May.