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Fig. 1 *Allium insubricum*

Since my very first garden in 1967, I have always been interested in growing bulbs and they still hold a fascination for me today. Over the years I have grown many different genera, species, and cultivars; the spring-flowerers are the ones I most look forward to seeing – heralds of the seasons to come, but when they have all finished flowering I start to look forward to the summer and autumn types. And next, of course, are the winter-flowerers!

Bulbs become available around September, as autumn planting is traditionally 'the right time'. However, I have often bought bulbs on offer as leftovers as late as February and, providing that they are not soft, shrivelled or with long sprouts, they can be planted right away and will flower just a bit later than usual. The following year they'll flower at the normal time.

Here I will describe some of the bulbs which have shown their worth in our Worcestershire garden, and how we cultivate them. The range of bulbs in garden centres is usually quite limited, and repetitive year after year, so if you are looking for a wider choice then mail-order specialists are the way to go. Their catalogues are usually well illustrated (temptingly so) but I have found it wise to compare prices as they can vary quite widely.

You can also purposely plant bulbs 'late': this year we had a bowl of *Anemone coronaria* 'Mr Ruffell' in full flower at the end of June from a mid-March planting. The secret is to keep the bulbs in cool, dormant storage until you plant them. Next year we're going to try planting one cultivar in succession to see how far we can stretch the flowering time.

If you are keen enough to grow from seed, you can acquire many species which

## Planting bulbs for colour next year

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Fig. 2 *Tulipa sprengeri*



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Fig. 3 *Muscari latifolium*

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Fig. 4 *Erythronium* 'Pagoda'

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Fig. 5 *Crocus tommasinianus* with *Cyclamen coum*

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Fig. 6 *Anemone blanda*

it is just not viable to grow in quantity commercially. I have grown many unusual bulbs from the HPS Seed Exchange, and even more from the Alpine Garden Society's Exchange. Many bulbous species will flower within three years from sowing and, if it takes longer, the thrill of seeing the first flower is even greater!

Mention bulbs, and the first to come to mind are daffodils and tulips. I am particularly fond of daffodils but have never really warmed to tulips, which always seem to go over rapidly once the buds have opened, especially in warm weather. Daffodils resist rain much better with their hanging or horizontal flowers, whereas tulips fill with rain making them too heavy for the stalk. However *Tulipa sprengeri* (fig. 2) is one of my favourite late-spring flowers; its petals almost close together at the top, defeating rain. It sets copious seed; I collect and sow some each year and let the rest form colonies by self-seeding.

There are thousands of named daffodil hybrids, but of those readily available I can only recommend that you try the ones you like the look of. Some have prospered for me, but others have dwindled and disappeared; I think that the quality of the original bulbs has been the reason,

rather than the garden conditions. Daffodils can be planted from September until November, and need to be planted so that the base of the bulb is at least three times deeper than the height of the bulb – so a 50mm-high bulb needs to be in a 150mm-deep hole. The same is true for tulip bulbs, but the best time for planting them is November as it reduces the possibility of the disease known as tulip fire. Daffodils can usually be relied upon to reappear each year and to steadily clump up, but the large hybrid tulips rarely do and should be treated as one-hit wonders and discarded after flowering.

Winter Aconites (*Eranthis*) and snowdrops (*Galanthus*) are the first bulbous genera to make a significant show and always a welcome sign that winter is beginning to recede. We grow about 80 cultivars of snowdrops and, although many have multiplied well and are of interest because of their different characteristics, the best effect has been achieved by the deliciously ordinary *Galanthus nivalis* growing en masse. Coupled with *Eranthis hyemalis* Cilicica Group (which has a bronzy tinge to the newly emerging foliage) they make a fine display.

Grape Hyacinths, *Muscari* species, have a bad reputation for being over zealous in their

reproduction, but we have grown *Muscari latifolium* in the same spot for over fifteen years and it's not made any kind of bid to take over (fig. 3). *M. latifolium* flowers are bi-coloured – deep dark blue at the base with a pale blue tuffet at the top. The bulbs are in the same area as primroses; they flower together and make good bedfellows.

*Erythronium* is a wonderful spring-flowering genus, but it's not happy in our heavy clay soil; we have a few here and there which have survived though not flourished. The bulbs are best bought as pot-grown plants – they do not like being dried out so are not well adapted to garden-centre packaging. Buy them and plant them as soon as you see them, then wait to see if you are blessed. There are many species and cultivars to choose from and to experiment with, and if you are lucky they will multiply happily. Our best successes have been with 'Pagoda' (fig. 4) and *E. californicum* 'White Beauty'.

*Crocus* is another genus that doesn't really like our conditions and we struggle to get any real effect, so I can't give any constructive advice as to the ones to choose. I always envy displays in parks and other people's gardens where they seem to thrive on apparent neglect. There are, of course, both spring- and autumn-flowering crocuses, but I find the autumn-flowerers are



Fig. 7 *Anemone coronaria* (de Caen Group) 'Bordeaux'

even harder to establish. Eventually you realise that you need to abandon the idea and move on! Even *Crocus tommasinianus* is difficult here, but a few have taken to living with our *Cyclamen coum* (fig. 5), really a tuber but often listed in bulb catalogues.

For a nice easy splash of early colour, you can do no better than try the various colour forms of *Anemone blanda* (fig. 6) in varying shades of blue, pink and white. They are cheap to buy in autumn. I find that soaking the knobbly tuberous rootstock overnight before planting encourages them to swell and to start into growth. They can be planted at any time in autumn, right up until December. New to me last year was *Anemone coronaria* (de Caen Group) 'Bordeaux' (fig. 7) which flowers in June from an early October planting,



Figs 8 *Ipheion* 'Alberto Castillo'



Fig. 9 *Scilla siberica*



Fig. 10 *Scilla* (syn. *Chionodoxa*) *luciliae*



Fig. 11 Snakeshead Fritillaries (*Fritillaria meleagris*)



Fig. 12 *Fritillaria acmopetala*

much later than *A. blanda*, and has the most beautiful deep-maroon flowers.

The summer dormancy of spring bulbs allows the forward-thinking gardener to use the same space for two or more plants at their different seasons. My personal favourite for this purpose is *Ipheion* 'Alberto Castillo' (fig. 8), an early-spring-flowering bulb which carries a profusion of quite large, clean-white flowers on short stems from February until the end of March, and then disappears in June, allowing other herbaceous plants nearby to spill over into its space.

Scillas, which now include what used to be called chionodoxas, are excellent spring-flowering bulbs to plant in autumn. The sparkling blue of *Scilla siberica* (fig. 9) and the starry pale-blue flowers of *S. mischtschenkoana* are outstanding, especially when grown in clumps or drifts. They are both easy

and inexpensive. What we've known as *Chionodoxa* are small but showy March/April-flowering bulbs, readily available in a range of colours from blue to pink and white. *S. luciliae* (fig. 10) is a lovely soft but showy blue. Earlier this year we saw a wonderful planting of *S.* 'Pink Giant', densely planted around a bronze-foliaged *Bergenia*, so we're now planning to add this delightful combination to our own garden for next year's display.

Snakeshead Fritillaries (*Fritillaria meleagris*) (fig. 11) are always a welcome sight in spring and the bulbs are cheap to buy. If you want lots more, let them self-seed or collect the seed and sow it as soon as it falls from the seed capsule – it will take about three years to reach flowering. The only other fritillary we grow in the garden is *F. acmopetala* (fig. 12), largely because it is easy and accommodating. It is about 45cm tall and carries long stems of green and brown bell-shaped flowers in early April. I also grow *F. michailovskyi* and *F. pudica* under glass, so as to appreciate their respectively golden-brown and yellow flowers in comfort in early March.

The Spanish bluebell (fig. 13) is much maligned because it's thought to hybridise with our more delicate native bluebell, but I think it a fine garden



Fig. 13 Spanish bluebells (*Hyacinthoides hispanica*)

plant. If the seedheads are removed as soon as the flowers fade it will considerably reduce its capacity to invade.

There are so many *Allium* varieties from which to choose, but enquiries are always made about three when they're in flower. *A. hollandicum* 'Purple Sensation' (fig. 14) is a showstopper in late April, and the seedheads are still showy at the end of June. In early July we cut off the seedheads to prevent their self-seeding; in some years the stems have died back sufficiently that we could simply pull them out. For an early June splash of colour I have grown low-growing *A. insubricum* (fig. 1) in a gravel bed for many years. Then in early July, *A. sphaerocephalon* (fig. 15) opens its small but showy heads of purplish-red flowers from buds which are a two-tone layering of green

and reddish purple at the top of metre-tall stems.

Of the many forms of *Eucomis*, we grow *E. comosa* 'Sparkling Burgundy' and *E. c.* 'Oakhurst' (fig. 16) successfully; both these Pineapple Lilies have strikingly upright strap-shaped leaves of a rich brownish hue, followed in late July and August by spikes of flowers which resemble those of a pineapple. As they come from South Africa *Eucomis* are generally considered to be on the tender side, but both came through the 2010/11 winter unscathed including enduring  $-18^{\circ}\text{C}$  for a week. We grow the 'Oakhurst' form alongside *Arrhenatherum elatius* var. *bulbosum* 'Variegatum', a whitish variegated grass, for a delightful contrast of colour and form.

We have two spring-flowering *Leucojum*: the Spring Snowflake,

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Fig. 14 *Allium hollandicum* 'Purple Sensation'



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Fig. 15 *Allium sphaerocephalon*



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Figs 16 *Eucomis comosa* 'Oakhurst'

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Fig. 17 Summer Snowflake, *Leucojum aestivum*

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Fig. 18 *Colchicum autumnale* 'Album'

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Fig. 19 *Colchicum agrippinum*

*L. vernum*, flowers first along with the snowdrops, and it is followed by the much taller *L. aestivum* (fig. 17), the Summer Snowflake, which despite its common name flowers in April and May. Both have bell-shaped hanging flowers with green tips. A third member of the genus, *L. autumnalis*, is now reassigned as *Acis autumnalis*. It is a dainty little species about 15cm tall and carries small white pendant bells; when it's happy it will self-seed copiously. Although it usually begins to flower in September, this year it flowered in mid-July, probably the result of the preceding long hot spell.

Blooming last in the year are a number of forms of the so-called Autumn *Crocus*, *Colchicum*; many are very similar, but all are worthy. Their massive leaves, which appear then disappear in spring, are usually considered

problematic, but if you remember this at planting time the leaves can serve as a backdrop for other plants. Then in September and October the *Colchicum* flowers emerge, without any foliage, giving their other common name, Naked Ladies. The tubes of *C. autumnale* 'Album' (fig. 18) flowers are elongated and liable to collapse, especially in wind and rain, but the sheer spectacle of the flowers makes them irresistible. If you can't be bothered, or don't have the room, I can recommend a clump of *C. agrippinum* (fig. 19) instead, a much smaller species considered to be better behaved for the smaller garden.

Finally, at the end of the year when all we have to look forward to is months of cold grey winter, there is nothing more exciting than scanning the catalogues to choose more bulbs. Join me, and look forward to reaping the rewards. 🌸

**Rob Cole** and his wife Diane moved to Meadow Farm in 1998 to continue their nursery business in rural Worcestershire. They propagate all their own stock and grow it on, outside, in a peat-free potting compost; a small polytunnel overwinters plants which are susceptible to winter wet and cold. Rob and Diane are in the process of retiring, but organised groups visiting their one-acre garden may also visit the nursery.

[www.meadowfarm33.co.uk](http://www.meadowfarm33.co.uk)