

In the garden with Shobha Vanchiswar



October 22, 2010

Coming to my garden this spring 2011: 1200 new flowers

So, I'm feeling mighty cheerful this week. I, well, my family and I, just planted over twelve hundred bulbs in the garden. It can be hugely daunting when faced with all those bags of assorted goodies. But that happens only at the time of planting.

When the shipment first arrives, I'm positively elated. As I inspect the contents, my elation turns to awe. A single bulb contains everything to fulfill the promise of spring. I read the labels on each packet and I'm transported to the many far-flung places where these flowers were first spied. Some of them were encountered the first time several hundred years ago. And now, they are here, ready to call my garden home. I am honored. I vow to do right by them.

Getting ready for Planting Day

With the bulbs in my custody, I check weather and calendar to decide on planting day. The temperature of the ground must be fifty degrees or below, but not frozen. It is important to ensure that the family is free of all commitments. I need their help. My mind has finally grasped that there awaits a fair quantity of bulbs and many hands will make light work, well, relatively light work. And I treat my back kindly, to keep it intact.

The appointed day arrives and I'm all set. I have already separated the bulbs in lots. Each lot is assigned to a specific part of the garden. Where I place the bulbs each year is all part of my long-range plan to encourage naturalization. Only the tulips are treated as annuals since the ones from previous years cannot be relied upon to return. And when they do, the flowers are invariably poor cousins to the originals.

Like a general I inform my family of the battle, oops, I mean, bulb plan. They stand like mercenaries and I observe how they stare, their eyes wide with fright, at the vast quantity of bulbs. I can hear the gears turning in their heads. They are wondering if the work will ever get done with time still remaining to perhaps eat a meal or two. I'm tempted to tell them that there will be no food until the bulbs are planted, but then I remember we live in a democracy. So, I make nice and offer payment of fine desserts. It works and we get on with the task at hand.

Adding blubs to beds already populated

The front perennial beds are solely my territory. There are already many bulbs in these modest beds and only I am brave enough to risk planting more without hurting the older residents. The other perennials have been cut back and this gives me a clear view of where I can plant specific bulbs. The others plant in the "meadow" where there are no rules. The various bulbs are planted randomly and the resulting show in spring is an exciting, natural-looking surprise. Besides, if I stipulate too much about placement, I risk mutiny. As long as the bulbs are planted properly, I don't really care. I suspect one of the earliest things my daughter learned was that the depth of the hole must be three times the bulb size.

To achieve the natural look, the bulbs are mixed up in a container and picked randomly for planting. In the perennial beds, I'm a little more careful to position the tulips and larger alliums in locations suitable to their size and appearance. They must look good together with the other flowers. The smaller bulbs get space more towards the front. As there are two such beds, I try to keep the look balanced without too strict a symmetry. This is, after all, not a very formal space.

Left alone to plant in the front garden, I pause. I am at this point also a bit intimidated by the sheer quantity of blubs to be planted. In the case of bulbs, the rule of thumb is: Whatever you think is adequate, triple that. That's how many you ought to plant for proper effect.

Bulb planting techniques

Taking a deep breath, I start. Over the years I've developed a method that allows me to go fast. I use my favorite hand trowel. I stick it in deep enough for the specific bulb and lift the soil sufficiently for the bulb to be eased into the hole by my free hand. Once the bulb is placed, I withdraw the trowel to release the soil and tamp it down. Using a dibble to make holes seems to me a slower method. I used to do it that way in the days when I did everything by the book. There is nothing wrong with that method and is the choice of my family. Stick with whatever works for you.

In the early years, I also sprinkled Bulb Tone or bone meal in each hole. What I learned was that the fertilizer announced the presence of bulbs to the critters that would either attack the bulbs or at the very least, pull them out of the holes. One year, I spent a whole morning replanting all the scattered bulbs that had been painstakingly planted the day before. It was sheer torture. Now I use subterfuge: I spread a layer of general, organic fertilizer over the whole area after the bulbs are in place. Besides confusing the critters, this technique also saves time and effort.

As each bulb is planted, I enjoy visualizing the flower and how it will look in this spot next spring. It is a bit like painting blind. I silently wish each bulb well. I have a covenant with Mother Earth. Together we make this garden.

Time for a break

Finally, the bulbs are planted and fertilizer is spread. I now have that satisfaction that comes from hard,

productive work. It feels good to just stand upright. Then I go see how the others are faring. They still have many bulbs remaining. I want to gloat, but control such wickedness. Instead, I fix lunch and call a break. They marvel at how fast I work and I permit myself a little preening. Eventually, all the planting is done. In truth, I am immensely grateful for their help. It is a family project and come bloom time, each of us will take pleasure in both the flowers as well as the memory of working together to make it happen.

For the present, I derive perverse pleasure from the soreness in my right palm where it curved repeatedly over the trowel hilt to drive it into the soil. These are war wounds of the best kind.

Addendum to last week's column about growing rosemary indoors over the winter

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If the rosemary plant does develop mildew, spray it with a solution of baking soda and water. Two to three treatments should clear it up.

For those of you who wrote me expressing interest in the Rosemary and Olive Oil Cake I mentioned last week, if you would like a copy of the recipe, please write to me directly at seedsofdesign@verizon.net .

Mark your calendars: Orchid expert at Chappaqua Library

I hope many of you are coming to the Rocky Hills Lecture Series on Tuesday, October 26, at 7:30 p.m. at the Chappaqua Library. Bill Smiles is a font of orchid information and freely allows the picking of his brain. Bring your questions and prepare to be informed. I look forward to seeing you!