



bright bulbs

Not sure which bulbs will grow in your climate? Use this handy guide

Gardeners often associate bulbs with spring-flowering varieties that grow in cooler climates, but there are varieties that thrive in every part of Australia. We can use techniques to trick bulbs into flowering outside their climate zone, but the surest path to success is to choose varieties suited to your area.

Most bulbs are waterwise. Spring bulbs grow and flower with winter and spring rains, and die down in summer. Autumn-flowering bulbs shoot with the autumn rains and die back when it gets cold.

The more well-known bulbs, such as tulips, daffodils and Dutch iris, come from cooler parts of Europe and central Asia, so they grow well in southern and eastern Australia, the tablelands around Cairns, the hills west of Brisbane and the south-west corner of Western Australia. These can be bought now and planted in cool climates next month, or planted mid-May in hot areas.

I garden in Perth and, while most of these popular bulbs cope with my hot, dry conditions, I have more success with those from the Mediterranean regions of southern Africa and southern Europe, which are used to occasional water shortages.

top choices

I have drifts of spring star flower, Spanish bluebell and snowflakes naturalising beneath my trees; and babiana, jonquil, chinchinchee, and the autumn-flowering nerine through my cottage gardens. However, the true survivors are the miniature gladiolus, freesia and belladonna lily that line the driveway where there's gutless, unimproved sand and no reticulation.

Other good varieties for naturalising include corn lily (*Ixia*), harlequin flower (*Sparaxis*), harvest brodiaea (*Brodiaea coronaria*), Cuban lily (*Scilla peruviana*) and cape cowslip (*Lachenalia*). All have weed potential, however, so avoid planting them near bushland. ▶

PHOTO: G.A.P.

Bulbs must be fed regularly in their first growing season to enable flowers the following year

In early autumn I treat myself to bags of inexpensive anemones and ranunculi. I only get a handful of flowers the second year, but gardeners with loamy soil will have more success. It's worth the effort for just one year's flowers as they put on a prolific garden display.

In the tropics, you can only succeed with spring-flowering European bulbs by growing them as potted annuals. The secret is providing six to eight weeks' chilling in the refrigerator before planting so the bulbs believe they have been through a cold winter. This method is also recommended for areas of Australia without regular frosts. Chilled bulbs such as daffodils, tulips, hyacinth, crocus and Dutch iris grow taller, germinate sooner and flower earlier than unchilled bulbs. In the tropics, keep them out of the rain and bring them inside when they start blooming.

There are a number of bulbs that do well in a tropical garden with minimal care. These include blood lily (*Haemanthus*), *Crinum*, fire lily (*Cyrtanthus*), Jacobean lily (*Sprekelia*), *Hippeastrum*, society garlic (*Tulbaghia*), *Habranthus*, spider lily (*Hymenocallis*) and rainflower (*Zephyranthes*). Native bulbs such as the Brisbane lily (*Proiphys cunninghamii*), garland lily (*Calostemma purpureum*) and swamp lily (*Crinum pedunculatum*) are all trouble free and create a lush, tropical look.

growing advice

Newly purchased bulbs have stored nutrients to support flowers the first year after planting. However, they must be fed regularly during their first growing season to enable flowers the following year.

Bulbs need well-drained soil with a generous supply of humus. Complete fertiliser high in phosphorus and potash must be worked in well in advance and not allowed to touch the bulb. Alternatively, enrich the soil with lots of organic matter and add blood and bone when flower buds appear. If you're planting only a few bulbs, it's easiest to buy a small bag of bulb-growing mix.

Plant bulbs to a depth that's twice their height – a bit deeper in sandy soil and warm areas – and two-bulb widths apart for a clumped effect. Put bulbs into the soil with the pointy end up, except ranunculus and anemone, which should be planted pointy end down.






When flowers finish, continually feed bulbs with liquid fertiliser until the foliage dies down to supply bulbs with food for next year's flowers. Tulips should be lifted annually when their leaves have completely withered. ▶

PHOTOS: GARDEN WORLD IMAGES & GAP






Here are five top bulb choices for those living in hot, dry areas, cool zones, and the tropics.

Key



-  full sun
-  semi-shade
-  shade
-  suitable for pots
-  frost resistant

mediterranean





▪ **baboon flower** (*Babiana stricta*) Plant at least 15cm deep. Leave in the ground to multiply. Ribbed hairy leaves and pink to purple cup-shaped blooms. Flowers in late spring.

↔ 10cm ↑ 15–30cm   




▪ **belladonna lily** (*Amaryllis belladonna*) Summer-dormant, autumn flowering. White or pink scented flowers on tall stems followed by strappy leaves. Prefers sun. Plant with neck exposed. Leave to multiply; no supplementary water needed when dormant.

↔ 30–50cm ↑ 60cm  

▪ **ranunculus** (*Ranunculus* spp.) Suits all climates except tropical. Poppy-like, ruffled, semi-double and double blooms in all colours except blue. Excellent as cut flowers. Plant 5cm deep with claws facing downwards.

↔ 12cm ↑ 40–50cm    

▪ **snowflake** (*Leucojum aestivum*) Leave undisturbed for years, plant in drifts beneath trees. Masses of dainty white bells with green dots on petal tips in late winter to spring.

↔ 30cm ↑ 45–55cm   

▪ **spring star flower** (*Ipheion uniflorum*) Star-shaped faces pointing upwards. Usually blue; white also available. Produced from mid-winter to mid-spring. Linear foliage. Weed potential.

↔ 15–20cm ↑ 5cm    

THE MANY FACES OF BULBS
Clockwise from far left *Leucojum aestivum* 'Gravetye Giant' look great in drifts; *Babiana stricta* flower late spring; *Ranunculus asiaticus* 'Gambit Mix' make excellent cut flowers; the autumn-flowering *Amaryllis belladonna*.



seasonal plants

cool

- **daffodil** (*Narcissus* spp.) Bright yellow, cream or yellow/orange blooms with central trumpet. Includes miniatures. Leave to naturalise if soil drains freely.

↔ 15cm ↑ 10–60cm ☀️ ☁️ 🪴

- **Dutch iris** (*Iris* Dutch hybrids) Blue, purple, yellow or white flowers with three main petals in tall stems and very fine foliage. Excellent cut flower; prefers wind protection. Plant in clumps.

↔ 12cm ↑ 60–80cm ☀️ ☁️ 🪴

- **saffron crocus** (*Crocus sativus*) Purple autumn flowers, with three golden stigmas per bloom, harvested for saffron. Needs winter-spring rain and dry summers.

↔ 10cm ↑ 40cm ☀️ ☁️ 🪴

- **snake's head fritillary** (*Fritillaria meleagris*) Square-shouldered bell flower with checkered, maroon colouring. Needs fertile soil with damp summers. Prefers semi-shade beneath deciduous trees.

↔ 5cm ↑ 40cm ☀️ ☁️ 🪴

- **tulip** (*Tulipa* spp.) Spectacular flowers that come in all colours and many forms. Best lifted and stored after flowering. Stems are shorter in warm climates.

↔ 15cm ↑ 20–80cm ☀️ ☁️ 🪴



WHEN IN BLOOM
Clockwise from top left *Fritillaria meleagris*; *Iris* 'Professor Blaauw'; *Crocus sativus*.



STANDOUTS

Cyrtanthus elatus.
Below *Hymenocallis speciosa*. Far right *Hippeastrum papilio*.



tropical

- **amaryllis** (*Hippeastrum* hybrid cultivars) Plant with necks out of the ground. Spring/summer flowering, big blooms with single, double or spider flowers. Prefers full sun but tolerates semi-shade. Great in a pot. Needs shelter from frost and rain in winter.

↔ 40cm ↑ 40–60cm ☀️ ☁️ 🪴

- **blood lily** (*Haemanthus coccineus*) Red, cup-shaped blooms with yellow stamens in autumn and two, huge, strappy or tongue-like leaves after flowering. Beware: many are toxic to humans and animals.

↔ 50cm–1.5m ↑ 15–40cm ☀️ ☁️ 🪴

- **Scarborough lily** (*Cyrtanthus elatus* syn. *Vallota speciosa*) Evergreen strappy foliage with orange-red, funnel-shaped blooms in summer/autumn. Popular cut flower. Feed weekly.

↔ 30cm ↑ 45cm ☀️ ☁️ 🪴

- **spider lily** (*Hymenocallis* spp.) Fine white flowers with long curled petals in summer. Strappy foliage; flowers best in sun.

↔ 25cm ↑ 60cm ☀️ ☁️ 🪴

- **swamp lily** (*Crinum pedunculatum*) Unfussy native for swampy or saline soils and coastal positions. Clusters of white fragrant flowers in spring and summer.

↔ 2–4m ↑ 1–2.5m ☀️ ☁️ 🪴 GA

