

Spring Flowering Bulbs for Pollinators

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Release: Week of October 14, 2023

We enjoy the beauty of the first blooms of spring. For early emerging pollinators, spring flowers are a welcome food source at a time when pollen and nectar is less abundant. Some spring flowering bulbs help fill this void and now is the time to plant.

Pollinator decline has been widely documented. It is associated with loss of habitat, monoculture planting (expanses of one type of plant leading to less biodiversity), pesticide use, pests and diseases, and climate change.

Creating pollinator habitats in backyards, parks, rural and other areas is an important and popular trend. One goal is to have something blooming from early spring to late fall. On days just over 40 degrees F many species of bees, moths and wasps begin to emerge from their winter homes ready to forage.

While science-based information on which bulbs most benefit pollinators is limited, crocus and grape hyacinth have been shown to provide forage. Minor or the less widely planted bulbs are also found on pollinator plant lists.

Species, such as species tulips, are preferred over hybrids for pollinators. Avoid buying hybrids with highly modified double and triple blooms. These are likely to inhibit a pollinator's ability to feed.

While crocus, species tulips, daffodils and hyacinth are fine to plant, here are some lesser known bulbs to add to pollinator habitats for early spring blooming.

One of the earliest to bloom are snowdrops (*Galanthus* spp.). These are short plants with nodding white flowers with green markings. Know that the green markings are likely directing pollinators to nectar and pollen. On flowers, these markings are referred to as nectar guides.

Next to bloom will be Glory-of-Snow (*Chionodoxa* spp.). This bulb grows up to eight inches tall with pink, blue and white upward facing flowers. They will sometimes bloom right through snow as will snowdrops.

Siberian squill (*Scilla siberica*) has deep blue flowers and is fairly low growing. It tolerates filtered shade, blooming best in full sun, and can multiply over time to fill in or naturalize areas. It is highly toxic.

Grape hyacinth (*Muscari* spp.) have small clusters of bell-shaped purple flowers each with a white rim, which are likely nectar guides. They bloom in mid-spring and are known favorites of bees.

Chequered lily (*Fritillaria meleagris*), also called Guinea hen flower, have interesting patterns on two-inch, nodding, purple blooms. Blooming in mid-spring, they need part shade and good moisture.

Alliums such as "Purple Sensation" and "Millenium" are pollinators magnets. Depending on the species, they bloom from late spring into summer.

When planting bulbs and corms in October and early November, prepare the soil prior to planting. The addition of organic matter like compost will greatly benefit the plants.

Plant at the depth recommended for the bulb and plant in drifts to provide more pollen and nectar for bees. After planting, maintain a moist soil up until the soil freezes to encourage root growth.