

The Bulbs of Autumn  
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The bulbs of autumn are unexpected jewels appearing during a season that we don't associate with geophytes. Fall is the time of year when gardener's flock to nurseries to purchase spring blooming bulbs. It is also the time to explore the treasure trove of fall bloomers that appreciate our dry summer climate and mild winters. Many flower shortly after planting—how's that for immediate gratification.

The area beneath the cherry tree in my gravel beds is my nemesis. It lies vacant and barren most of the summer. Tree roots perforate the soil surface making it a difficult area to plant. A few rag tag ground covers languish, drooping foliage begging for water. Early in September, the wasteland is transformed as *Cyclamen hederifolium* launches lavender- pink flowers with twisted, reflexed petals. The dainty white flowers *C. hederifolium* 'Album' sparkle amidst the preponderance of pink. The blossoms, borne on diminutive wiry, upright, stems appear before the elegant heart-shaped foliage unfurls. Leaf surfaces are mottled and stippled, overlaid with silver or darker shades of green, exquisitely detailed. Colonies are forming in the partially shady gravel beds in rapidly draining soil without benefit of supplemental summer water.

Later in the month the chalice-shaped blooms of a host of colchicums breach the soil. Although they bear a passing resemblance to crocus, they are members of the lily not the iris family. Colchicum flowers are larger than those of crocuses and range from pink, rose, and lilac to white. The strappy foliage doesn't appear until spring beginning its decline in the early summer when it collapses in a heap. Plant colchicums among ground covers or small perennials to support the heavy blooms and camouflage decaying foliage.

*Colchicum agrippinum* fascinates me with its checker board patterned rosy- pink and purplish- pink funnel-shaped flowers. Pair it with the dark, dusky blades of *Ophiopogon planiscapus*

'Nigrescens', black mondo grass, for instant impact. The white tulip-shaped flowers of *C. autumnale* 'Album' shimmer as twilight approaches, floral lanterns in the garden. The double flowered form *C.* 'Waterlily' is blowsy and overblown an apt companion planted at the feet of *Callicarpa* 'Amethyst Mist'. Colchicums prefer well drained soil and like the winter protection of ¼-10 gravel mulch. Purchase corms in late summer and plant immediately—as they bloom right away.

The common name for *Sternbergia lutea*, autumn daffodil, is a total misnomer as they don't look anything like daffodils to whom they are distantly related. Instead they resemble crocuses. Although the goblet shaped flowers stand a mere six inches tall their school bus yellow blooms are hard to ignore. They demand well-drained soil and don't tolerate heavy clay soil or standing water. They thrive in my gravel beds tucked into open spaces close to heaths and heathers and nestled at the feet of *Aster* 'Purple Dome'

Although we associate crocuses with spring there are species that bloom in the fall. The saffron crocus, *Crocus sativus* has a long, storied history. The long, gold-orange styles are harvested, roasted and sold as the expensive and flavorful spice saffron. On a warm autumn day lilac-purple flowers open wide revealing the vividly colored styles. Planted next to the wall in freely draining, amended soil they have, overtime, naturalized. The downside is that a larcenous neighbor, who we imagine is a chef, pinches out the styles under the cover of darkness every year. The ghostly lavender cups of *Crocus speciosus* are intermingled with the rose-pink blooms of *Crocus kotschyanus* (syn. *Crocus zonatus*) in the gravel beds. They have not performed well in the heavier clay soil in the back garden.

*Nerine bowdenii*, a South African native in the amaryllis clan, thrives in full sun in rich, gritty, well drained soil in the hottest of my gravel beds. The summer dormant bulbs assert themselves in mid-autumn sending up fleshy, leafless stems bearing umbels of pink funnel-shaped blooms. The musky perfume prevails at twilight. The strappy leaves of the spider or Guernsey lily appear later in the season. Plant with the neck of the bulb exposed in fast draining soil.

In late September large clumps of x *Amarcrinum*, which punctuate the sunny beds in the back garden, burst into flower. Two and half foot stems jut out of the thickets of dark green, evergreen foliage, waving pompoms of soft pink flower clusters. One of my favorite plants

based on the heavenly scent exuded by the long lasting blooms which are good cut flowers.

*Fuchsia 'Isis'*, dripping dainty blooms of red and magenta, is a scrimmy foil for the bold form of *x Amarcrinum*. This cross between *Amaryllis belladonna* and *Crinum moorei* is deer and rodent proof. For best results plant in well-drained, amended soil in full sun.

Shop now and enjoy the pleasures of autumn blooming bulbs. Fall flowering bulbs may not be as showy and bombastic as their spring blooming brethren yet they augment the late season garden with their fresh demeanor in a most satisfying way.