Celebrate the Year of the Hyacinth!

Hyacinths are spring-flowering bulbs that are treasured by gardeners for their heavenly fragrance.

Overview and History

Flower lovers began cultivating hyacinths more than 400 years ago. During the 18th century, they were the most popular spring bulbs in the world, and Dutch growers offered more than 2000 named cultivars. Today, there are less than 50 cultivars in commercial production, but the hyacinth’s beauty and sweet perfume are as enchanting as ever.

Commonly called Dutch hyacinths or garden hyacinths, they are hybrids of a single species (Hyacinthus orientalis) that grows wild in Turkey, Syria, and other areas in the eastern Mediterranean.
Plant hyacinth bulbs where it will be easy to enjoy their fragrance: near a doorway, along a garden path, or at the front edge of a flower border.

Hyacinth bulbs can cause mild skin irritation. Wear gloves when planting them or wash your hands after handling them. Hyacinth bulbs contain oxalic acid, which makes them unappealing to chipmunks and voles as well as deer.

Hyacinths are long-lasting cut flowers that will perfume an entire room. Plant some bulbs in your vegetable garden so you can cut and share the blooms.

Hyacinths flower in early to mid-spring at the same time as emperor and double early tulips, mid-season daffodils, chionodoxa, scilla and muscari.

Encourage hyacinths to bloom for more than one year by cutting off the flower spikes as soon as the flowers fade.

Basic Types and Variety Names

Today’s garden hyacinths look very different from the wild species. After centuries of breeding, they have taller flower spikes and much larger, mostly double florets that are tightly packed along the stem. Each hyacinth bulb produces a single 8 to 12” tall flower stalk and 4 to 6 strappy leaves. The blossoms open in mid-spring, at the same time as daffodils and early tulips.

Hyacinths come in rich, saturated colors. The most popular cultivars are shades of purple and blue, which include Blue Jacket (royal blue), Delft Blue (cerulean), and Aida (violet-blue). Other colors are equally lovely and suggest lots of creative pairings. These include Woodstock (burgundy), Jan Bos (hot pink), Aiolos (white), Gypsy Queen (peach), and City of Haarlem (pale yellow).

Garden Tips for Hyacinths:

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How to Grow Hyacinths in the Garden

Hyacinth bulbs are planted in mid to late fall, at the same time as tulips and daffodils. Choose a planting location with well-drained soil that never gets soggy. Full sun is best, though hyacinths will also grow in light shade. Plant the bulbs in groups of 5 or more, spaced about 5” apart on center, and buried 4 to 5” deep. In hardiness zones 6 and warmer, hyacinths grow well in outdoor containers, on their own, or mixed with other spring bulbs. Consider planting extra hyacinth bulbs to cut and enjoy indoors.

Like tulips, hyacinths always look their best the first spring after planting. For this reason, most gardeners plant fresh bulbs every year or two. While the bulbs will usually rebloom for several years, they will gradually revert to the original species, with single florets that are widely spaced along the stem.

To help the bulbs save energy for future flowers, cut off the flower stalks after the blossoms fade and allow the foliage to grow until it dies back in early summer.

How to Force Hyacinths for Indoor Blooms

Growing hyacinths indoors lets you get a jump on spring, with fragrant blooms that last for weeks. Plant the bulbs in late fall. Use pots that have drainage holes on the bottom and are approximately 6” deep. Fill them with moist growing mix (not garden soil) and plant the bulbs 2” apart with the top of the bulb about 1” below the soil surface. Water lightly.

To bloom properly, potted hyacinth bulbs must be exposed to consistently cold temperatures (40-45°F) for a minimum of 10 weeks. An unheated garage can work as long as the bulbs do not freeze. A refrigerator is another option if it doesn’t contain ripening fruit, which can damage the bulbs. After this chilling period, move the pots to a sunny window and enjoy watching them come into flower.