

PLANTING AND CARING FOR HYACINTHS AND GRAPE HYACINTHS

HYACINTHS

Hyacinths bloom in midspring, filling the garden with a burst of pastel colours when most of the garden is just waking up. Their fragrance is so intoxicating that they have been called “nature’s perfume.” Like most perennial bulbs, they are easy to grow and come back year after year! Hyacinths are also wonderful for container gardens. Here is a guide to growing and caring for Hyacinths.

ABOUT HYACINTHS AND GRAPE HYACINTHS

Hyacinths (*Hyacinthus*): Originally a pale blue or violet flower, hyacinth now come in a rainbow of colours including lilacs, pinks, white, cobalt blue, cream, apricot and even a blood red hue. Each hyacinth bulb generally produces one flower stalk that stands 8 to 10” tall. The hyacinth’s loose-to-dense racemes (clusters) of strongly fragrant flowers may be closely packed, single or double flowers.

Grape hyacinths (*Muscari*) are not directly related to true hyacinths, but also bloom in mid-spring and have the same care requirements. This tiny wonder has small clusters of bell-shaped, cobalt-blue flowers.

As hyacinth are one of the first blooms, they look best at the front of a perennial garden, near the front door, along a walkway or in mixed borders. These beauties are also a great choice for pots and planters. Hyacinth make wonderful cutting flowers, too, and look stunning in bouquets. As the flowers are famous for their fragrance, you can bring the sweet scent of spring inside!

The Victorians revered hyacinths for their sweet, lingering fragrance, and carefully massed them in low beds, planting in rows of one colour each. In general, hyacinths are said symbolize playfulness, sport, and rashness, though meanings are colour dependent. Learn more about the meanings of flowers.

Please note: They must have cold temperatures of 40 (4.5C) to 45°F (7C) for at least 12 to 14 weeks. So no problem here in St Ives!! [If temperatures in your area do not get this cold, you will need to pre-chill the bulbs in a refrigerator before planting them outdoors].

PLANTING

WHEN TO PLANT HYACINTHS

Plant hyacinth bulbs in mid-to-late autumn, any time after your first autumnal frost but before the ground freezes.

CHOOSING AND PREPARING A PLANTING SITE

For the largest blooms and straightest stems, choose a site that gets full sun. The bulbs are tolerant of partial shade as well but will develop a leaning habit towards the natural light source.

Grow in loosened, moderately fertile soil that drains well. Avoid low areas where water collects; hyacinths will rot in wet soil.

Before planting, loosen the soil and work in 2 to 4 inches of compost or bonemeal for fertility. On heavy wet cold clay soils, place about an inch to an inch and a half depth of horticultural grit before setting your bulbs into position.

HOW TO PLANT HYACINTHS

Plant hyacinth bulbs 6" deep. Space 5 to 6" apart (grape hyacinth can be 2" apart).

If you wish to plant 5 or more bulbs at the same time, dig out a larger area. Hyacinths look beautiful in groupings of 5 to 9 bulbs.

Grape hyacinth also look best in masses and loose drifts.

Set the bulb in the hole, directly on top of the grit layer where used, with the pointed end up.

After planting and covering with soil, water thoroughly.

Apply a 1-to-2-inch layer of mulch around the plants to discourage weeds and disease.

If you are transplanting i.e. moving from one area of a bed to another, water sparingly and then do not water again, if needed, until flower buds appear the following year.

Warning: Hyacinth bulbs (and daffodil bulbs) contain a substance called oxalic acid, which can be irritating to bare skin. Use gloves when handling these bulbs for extended periods.

FORCING HYACINTH BULBS INDOORS

Hyacinth bulbs may be forced into early growth for indoor display in the winter. Plant them with the tips just showing, in soil-based potting mix in containers with drainage holes.

Keep in a dark place at temperatures above freezing but no higher than 45°F (7°C), for at least 10 weeks to allow roots to develop. A cool shed would be ideal.

When shoots are about 1 inch long, increase light and temperature gradually.

Water carefully, avoiding wetting the shoots or waterlogging the soil. Soil should be moist, not wet.

After flowering, forced hyacinths may be transplanted to the garden and they will flower again in subsequent years.

CARING FOR HYACINTHS

Do NOT over water hyacinth. They do not like stand water or to have “wet feet.” Water ONLY if the soil is dry at a depth of 3 inches. If it is dry at that depth, it is ONLY THEN OKAY to water.

With the organic matter and mulch, you do not need to fertilize. However, it's fine to sprinkle a commercial organic fertilizer over the soil.

Protect container-grown plants from excessive winter moisture by keeping them covered or moving them to a sheltered area.

PESTS/DISEASES

Bulbs are prone to grey mould and bulb rot when kept too wet.

So in answer to John's question

WHAT TO DO WITH HYACINTHS AFTER FLOWERING

For out of doors grown bulbs

After your hyacinths have finished flowering, remove the blooms, but do not remove the foliage. The application of a liquid feed e.g. seaweed based would not go amiss but not essential. The bulbs need their leaves to gather energy for next year's blooms. At the end of the spring season, the foliage will die back naturally. Only remove the leaves when they have turned brown to help prevent fungal diseases. Hyacinth bulbs can remain in the ground throughout the year in the UK. As already stated, Hyacinths require a period of colder weather to bloom.

For bulbs which have been grown indoors

Hyacinth bulbs that have finished flowering indoors can be transplanted to the garden. After flowering, they need time to gather energy for next year's blooms, so they should not be placed directly into storage. As above allow to die back naturally and for the first few weeks after flowering has finished the application of a liquid feed would be beneficial. Simply dead head the blooms, apply the liquid feed to the container, place outside and allow the foliage to die back in it's own time.

After the foliage has died back, the hyacinth bulbs can be brought indoors and stored in a cool, dark, dry place until planting in September/October.

RECOMMENDED VARIETIES

I feel it is not for me to recommend varieties as it is all about personal preferences. What I would suggest however is that if you are really keen to get best advice visit: Alan Shipp at 9 Rosemary Road, Waterbeach, Cambridge CB25 9NB Tel: 01223 571064 or e mail him at alan.shipp@virgin.net and arrange to meet with him and view his incredible collection of Hyacinths many of which he has bred. He holds the National Hyacinth orientalis Collection for the NCCP&G.

If you go to this page of 'the biker gardener', he has posted an informative narrative of his visit to Alan's 1 Acre Hyacinth plot at Waterbeach and includes many photographs all of which he has labelled

<https://www.thebikinggardener.com/2017/03/28/dedication-alan-shipp-and-his-hyacinths>