

# Seasonal Color With California Bulbs

By ARVIND KUMAR

When European botanists and horticulturists started visiting California in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, they were awestruck by the beauty of the local flora. They collected seeds and sent them back to Europe, where they were propagated and commanded instant attention. Horticultural treasures of California were eagerly sought by European gardeners, and cultivated in gardens throughout Europe.

Among those treasures were bulbs, which once occurred throughout California, and which are in cultivation in Europe to this day. Indeed, the largest growers of California bulbs are located in Holland. These European-grown California native bulbs are now exported all over the world, including to the U.S.

What we commonly call “bulbs” are either true **bulbs** (fleshy leaves) or **corms** (fleshy stems). They both reside underground. Once a year, leaves emerge and the plant blooms. After flowering, the plant “disappears”, going dormant, to return again next season. This is the lifecycle of bulbs.

Cold climate bulbs like tulips go dormant during freezing winters. Warm climate bulbs like our California bulbs go dormant during summer and fall.

**WHY GROW CALIFORNIA BULBS?** First, to introduce **seasonal color and variety** to your spring garden. No matter how showy, a garden that looks the same month after month can become boring. A garden that changes with the seasons is in tune with the cycle of nature, always changing, always renewing itself. California bulbs not only give the garden a sense of place (“This is California!”) but also a sense of time: they are the unique markers of spring glory.

Second, bulbs are the ultimate in **low maintenance** gardening. They need minimal effort at planting time (no need to dig big holes) and no effort thereafter, ever! They come up with the winter rains, and flower in spring and early summer. They disappear during summer and fall – you won’t even know they are there – to return in winter, year after year. Not all bulbs flower at the same time, and with judicious selection, and it is possible to have color from late February through June.

**BULB CULTURE:** Success with California bulbs is assured if you follow these simple rules:

*Locate them in full sun or part sun.* Since they are invisible 6 months of the year, place them around existing shrubs, perennials, and bunchgrasses.

*Do not amend the soil.* Do not locate them in extensively cultivated beds or vegetable patches. Mine grow in the characteristic clay soil of the Santa Clara Valley floor. Some bulbs like gravelly, well-draining soil, but the ones listed in this article do fine in clay.

*Plant in late fall, right after the first rain.* Plant each bulb 3-6” deep. Shallow plantings often don’t survive. Make sure the root end is pointing down.

*Do not water the beds through summer and fall.* This is really important. Native bulbs need a period of rest, and will rot with summer water. The ideal spot is far away from the garden hose, sprinklers, and emitters.

*Guard against snails and slugs.* Except for alliums, most California bulbs are extremely attractive to these garden pests. Use Sluggo or hand pick at night.

In early summer, remove the dried stalks for neatness. Be sure to collect the seeds for propagation or for trading with fellow gardeners.

If you are new to native bulbs, try these easy-to-grow varieties. They are easy to find, affordable, and reliable performers in my San Jose garden.

**Oneleaf Onion** (*Allium unifolium*) is an early bloomer, with blossoms ranging from pink to near-white. At 18” tall, it is a significant presence, and is best planted 2’ or more away from the edge of beds. With time, it will colonize and form mounds. Blooms in April.

**Ithuriel’s Spear** (*Triteleia laxa*) is a common sight in the foothills in late spring, its blue funnel-shaped flowers swaying among the golden grasses. It is also one of the least fussy. Some in my garden are 5 years old, returning reliably every spring. A late bloomer, it flowers in May, when its grass-like leaves have dried up. The flowers last several weeks. ‘Queen Fabiola’ is a common cultivar. This bulb has been in cultivation in Europe since 1832, and is still widely grown!

**Prettyface** (*Triteleia ixioides*) adds cheer to the spring garden with its cream-colored flowers held on long-stalked umbels. At 8”, it can be placed near paths and in front of shrubs. Combine it with a low-growing, blue-flowering ceanothus such as Yankee Point for contrast, or pair it with California poppies for warm color. This long bloomer lasts from mid-April through mid-May.

**California Brodiaea** (*Brodiaea californica*) blooms in late spring – mine flowered through late May! The lavender-white-cream flowers are particularly large and showy, and stand 1’ tall. Mass them for emphasis. Great for rock gardens.

Remember that fall is the time to acquire and plant bulbs. Popular varieties often sell out, so place your order early to avoid waiting for another season.

Sources: [www.californianativebulbs.com](http://www.californianativebulbs.com),  
[www.telosrarebulbs.com](http://www.telosrarebulbs.com), [www.vanengelen.com](http://www.vanengelen.com)

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