

For Early Spring Blooms try Minor Bulbs **Margaret Murphy, Horticulture Outreach Specialist**

It may seem too early to think about spring blooms. After all, most gardeners are busy cleaning up their garden beds and getting them ready for winter. But fall is the time to plant spring-flowering bulbs.

If you are planning a spring garden, consider adding some of the minor bulbs. Minor bulbs refer to a group of small-sized flowering bulbs that emerge very early in the spring. They often don't make it into one's landscape, which is unfortunate since their blooms offer a pop of early season color. Many naturalize well and can be long-lived with minimal care (naturalize refers to bulbs that return each year and multiply on their own).

One of the first flowering bulbs to emerge in spring is the common snowdrop (*Galanthus nivalis*). It has a dainty, white bell-like flower with striking green edging that lines the tips of the inner petals. The plant reaches about four inches in height and is easy to grow. It can be planted in either full sun or partial shade and can withstand a coating of late season snow.

Winter aconite (*Eranthis hyemalis*) is another flowering bulb to show itself very early. Its big, bright yellow flower is a cheery sight especially when plants are grouped together covering a broad area. Winter aconite is a low growing, rapidly spreading flower that, like the common snowdrop, can tolerate being covered by snow. It makes an excellent choice for rock gardens and will grow in full sun or light shade.

One minor bulb that I enjoy seeing in my perennial flower bed is the striped squill (*Puschkinia scilloides*). This unusual flower has blue stripes bisecting its white petals. It has a spike form and reaches about six inches tall. It is always such a treat to find a scattering of this delicate flower in bloom when I tidy up the flower bed in early spring. The striped squill will readily multiply and can grow in full sun or partial shade.

Two of the more familiar flowers in the minor bulb category are the crocus and grape hyacinth. The crocus (*Crocus* hybrids) has a cup-shaped flower and comes in an assortment of colors. It reaches only three to four inches tall and does well in full or partial sun. Crocus come in both early spring and fall blooming varieties. It spreads easily and can add wonderful color to a spring garden.

Grape hyacinth (*Muscari armeniacum*) offers a dazzling pop of blue in the spring landscape. It reaches six to eight inches in height and forms a spike of densely packed flowers that resemble a bunch of grapes. Unlike most other spring flowering bulbs, the leaves of the grape hyacinth die back after flowering only to reappear in the fall and winter over. Grape hyacinths can multiply quickly once they are established.

Because of their small size, most reaching less than six inches in height, minor bulbs work well planted in rock gardens, as border plantings, or in containers. Because they bloom early, they can be planted under deciduous shrubs and trees providing spring color before the trees and shrubs leaf out. Mass or group plantings offer a more natural look as well as greater visual impact. Minor bulbs offer a burst of much needed color in a late winter/early spring landscape making it worth the effort to head out and do some planting this fall.