



COLORBLEND.COM PHOTOS

The two-tiered Mercury's Rising is a maroon and pink blend that adds beauty to any garden.

Spadework for springtime beauty



IRENE
VIRAG

You've probably already planted most of your spring-flowering bulbs, and I admire you. I'm just getting around to it. Or at least I'm expecting my order any day now. When it comes to bulbs, my problem isn't in the planting. It's in the picking.

I mean, who wouldn't enjoy planting bulbs — unless, of course, you wait too long and the ground's freezing. Around this time in early November, there's just a hint of winter in the earth, and a heavy wool sweater is only an occasional necessity.

Besides, it's a blessing to

Coming Thursday

Snakes in the grass? In Part 2, garden columnist Jessica Damiano shares tips on how to send them packing.



Prinses Irene, left, can look royal in combinations; *Camassia cusickii*, center, has spikes of pale blooms; right, Tiny Bubbles, mini-daffodils.

plant a bulb — each one containing the food and nutrients to keep the growing plant going through the winter. Cut a hyacinth bulb in half, and you'll find an embryo of the flower itself. To me, bulbs are nature's little miracles.

But there are so many to choose from — so many varieties, so many shapes, so many sizes, so many colors. So many catalogs to look through, so many pages to earmark. If you don't have unlimited space as well as a hedge fund or two, you're in trouble.

And I like ordering new varieties. At the Garden Writers Association's national convention a few weeks ago, I checked in with Brent and Becky Heath, who nurture bulbs in their fields in Virginia. Perhaps you have their catalog. They got me excited about Tiny Bubbles, one of their own seedlings — a yellow, super-fragrant, mini-daffodil they hope will surpass the dainty Tete-a-Tete many gardeners have come to enjoy.

My list includes diminutive tulips like pink-petaled Little Beauty as well as giant alliums

like softball-size lilac Gladiator. And I'm trying a crazy-looking green allium called Hair that looks like it's having a bad hair day.

I'm also getting *Fritillaria persica*, an heirloom bulb that makes an exotic appearance with plum-colored bell-shaped flowers. Not to mention *Camassia cusickii* with spikes of pale blue blooms, and Calochortus Symphony with pastel blooms that make me want to sing. And I'm looking for a tulip called Prinses Irene — OK, I admit that I like its name, but the big lure is the

bright orange flower with purple flames on the petals.

Prinses Irene looks even more royal in combination with *Fritillaria imperialis* Rubra Maxima. Brent and Becky had already sold out of both. I consider *Fritillaria imperialis*, commonly called Crown Imperial, the most regal of the fritillarias, and I found it in the Colorblends catalog. I'm still hoping to track down Prinses Irene.

I made my life easier by getting a variety of tulips from

See VIRAG on G10

Groundwork for the spring

VIRAG from G8

Colorblends. Their experts save time and anguish for people like me who can second-guess themselves into eternity when it comes to selecting combinations. Basically, this Bridgeport, Conn.-based company blends tulips of different colors — and even shapes, sizes and heights — that will bloom at the same time. I'm trying Gudoshnik, a tall tulip that creates its own blend with changing shades of peach and rose, as well as Going Baroque, a lush combination of rose, pink and lavender-blue doubles that resembles peonies.

And I can hardly wait to see the sassy white, yellow and orange show of The Tang Dynasty. I even decided to take a chance on the two-tiered maroon and pink blend called Mercury's Rising. I love the idea of cotton candy-colored tulips on 22-inch purple stems rising above a layer of ruffled maroon double-flowered beauties.

And I'm adding more Byzantine Gladiolus from Old House Gardens, a small company in Michigan founded by Scott Kunst, the Indiana Jones of the bulb world. Scott saves heirloom bulbs on the verge of extinction and propagates them. Some go back as far as the 15th century. Byzantine Gladiolus — a 2- to 3-foot-tall perennial with deep magenta flowers that look like orchids — was spectacular in my garden last spring.

And since lilies touched my soul with their scent and loveli-

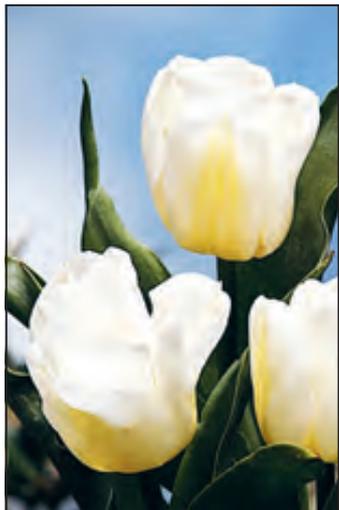
ness more than ever this past season I'm trying some varieties that will be new to my garden — Black Beauty, which actually has dark raspberry blooms edged in silver, Citronella, with lemon-yellow flowers that look as if they're freckled with poppy seeds, and pink-and-white Rubrum, which dates back to 1830 and which Scott calls his "favorite floral fragrance." And I'm going with the tulips Black Parrot, a frilly maroon number, and Insulinde, a ruffled creamy white heirloom with purple flames.

Of course, I'm not just buried in catalogs — I've been checking out nurseries and garden centers. Mostly, I'm interested in tulips suggested by my friend Sally Ferguson of the Netherlands Flower Bulb Information Center. Sally is a hardy soul who used to do her bulb gardening around her brownstone in Brooklyn but now contends with coyotes, moose and bears in Vermont. Her choices include velvety maroon Queen of Night, pink

Barcelona, yellow Yokohama, white Calgary, soft orange Ballerina and Flaming Parrot, which is creamy yellow with red flames.

Obviously, I'm homing in on tulip bulbs. I already have thousands of daffodils — most of them from Van Bourgondien and recommended by Long Island's own bulb lady, Debbie Van Bourgondien. Beauties like pale lemon Spellbinder and orange Ambergate and pink-cupped Chromacolor.

Daffodils are automatic spirit-lifters. And how could



White Calgary lights up a bulb garden.

NFBIC PHOTO



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The pink-petaled Little Beauty is a diminutive tulip.

you not love a bulb that squirrels won't eat? You also should know that squirrels turn up their noses at fritillarias and alliums. As my faithful readers know, I see nothing cute about squirrels. Show me a squirrel with a tulip bulb in its mouth and I'll show you a rapacious invader. More than that, I'll show you a dirty little rat.

I have tried everything, from pepper to coyote urine, to discourage squirrels. Still, I plant tulips because they're beautiful. The past two years, we had partial success with chicken wire. We put it over the bulb beds and keep it there until the plants emerge in the spring. Some of the furry-tailed marauders find a way to get under the wire, but that's another reason I plant en masse — I figure there's more likelihood they'll leave some for me.

Also, I may try a suggestion from Cindy Krezel, a bulb war veteran who gar-

dens in Brentwood. Her anti-squirrel recipe is to buy ground red pepper in bulk and roll the bulbs in it as if you were dredging chicken in flour or bread crumbs. Then plant and cover the bed with more pepper.

I don't know about you, but just talking about the bulbs I'm planting makes me happy. I'm sure there's time for you to find some more for your own garden. If the weather cooperates, you can keep tucking them in the ground into December.

So plant some bulbs — and dream of spring.

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Turn bulbs into beauty

Even little miracles like bulbs can use some help. Here are some tips.

- Squeeze bulbs to make sure they're firm. Don't worry about nicks or loose or missing tunics (that's what the papery covering is called). But dump bulbs that are deeply scarred, mushy or smell moldy.

- Take mail-order bulbs out of the box and store them in dry, well-ventilated areas. Because you can't tell a red tulip from a yellow one by looking at the bulb, keep them in their labeled mesh bags until planting day.

- Plant before the ground freezes.

- Choose a well-drained site. Soggy soil can cause fungal diseases and rot, so avoid areas where puddles collect. And remember, daffodils need about six to eight hours of sun even after the flowers fade. The foliage uses sunlight to replenish the bulb for the following spring. So plant in sunny beds. Don't cut, tie or bend the foliage after the flowers peter out — let leaves yellow and flop over before removing them.

- Dig a hole three times as deep as the bulb's height. That's five inches for crocuses and snowdrops, eight inches for tulips and daffodils.

- Plant the pointy end up. If there's any doubt, plant the bulb on its side.

- Plant in bunches (drifts). Or combine daffodils with daylilies. The daylily foliage will hide the withering leaves. Don't plant bulbs in single-file rows.

- Top dress with an organic bulb fertilizer or a slow-release formula. Don't put fertilizer in the planting hole — it could burn roots. And don't use bone meal — it attracts rodents and dogs and does nothing for the bulb.

- Water after planting and mulch with compost, pine needles or well-chopped pine bark.

— IRENE VIRAG