

GARDENS

High on Hyacinths

IT'S NOT THAT I'm fickle when it comes to flowers, it's just that I keep finding new loves. I still talk to my daffodils, I wink at my crocuses and I have a soft spot for my fritillaria. But this year, I'm in love with my hyacinths.

I'd never really done much with hyacinths. I planted a few here and a few there and to tell the truth, they looked a little forlorn. Then last fall I

was struck by the hyacinths I spotted in a catalog. I ordered a number of varieties — and enough so that I could plant them in drifts, which is the way most bulbs show off best.

Anyway, I ordered several varieties and got them in the ground in several spots in the front yard in November. They were just starting to push up when we put in a new double front door. Workmen trudged across the beds and I worried about the bulbs. But they not only survived, they're covering themselves and the garden with glory.

They're all Dutch hyacinths — lusty and luxuriant, from 8 to 12 inches tall, with wonderful color. They're just right for the season — elegant rather than brassy and bright but not blinding. The ones I like best are vibrantly pink Anna Marie, pure white Carnegie, lilac-colored Amethyst, Blue Ice that is the color of Wedgwood, and a variety called Peter Stuyvesant, which is as deep violet as a sky on the edge of evening.

My new loves are gorgeous around the mailbox and at the corner of the shade garden and absolutely inspiring right outside our new front door. I can admire them through the beveled glass, and when I open the door, their sweet, heady fragrance is heartbreaking. To me, hyacinths and lilacs are the way spring is supposed to smell.

Scents are always hard to be precise about, but I'm trying because of a questionnaire I received the other day the Netherlands Flower Bulb Information Center. They want me to take part in a "Best Sniffs

Survey" by describing selected spring bulbs that include Blue Jacket and Carnegie hyacinths as well as some fragrant tulips and daffodils. I think their perfume has a strong and lovely old-fashioned charm, but I'm still clearing my nose. All I can say so far is that the minute I open the door, I'm entranced. I stand in the morning sun — and in the rain, too — simply drawing in deep breaths.

When I think about it, I'm surprised that I took so long to fall for hyacinths. I've always liked the fact that, like tulips and daffodils, they're true bulbs that contain the plant itself and the sugar, starch and protein to make it grow. Slice a hyacinth bulb in half lengthwise and you'll see the perfectly formed embryonic flower surrounded by the fleshy tissue that nourishes it. I'm touched by the concept of the infant blossom — it's further proof of the kinship of all living things.

Also, for those of us who like myth and melodrama, the legend of the hyacinth is the stuff of prime time soap opera, full of passion and violence. There are a couple of variations but the most popular story is that Apollo, the sun god, and Zephyr, the wind god, both favored a handsome youth named Hyacinth. One day Apollo was showing Hyacinth the finer points of discus throwing. What started as fun and games ended sadly. Tragedy struck in the form of the discus — it hit Hyacinth in the head and killed him. But it was no accident. Zephyr had been watching with growing jealousy. He deliberately blew the discus off course to strike the boy. And a flower grew from Hyacinth's wound



Irene Virag



Newsday Photos / Tony Jerome

You can almost smell the sweetness of this hyacinth. In real life, the fragrance of these flowers is even better.

as he died in Apollo's arms.

Of course, it's only fair to point out that the bloom born of this saga of love and jealousy probably wasn't a true hyacinth because the flower wasn't native to Greece. The Dutch Hyacinth varieties that grace most of our gardens are the descendants of *Hyacinthus orientalis*, which grew wild in Turkey. It was kind of wishy-washy with about 15 pale blue flowers growing along a central axis. But its perfume apparently made up for its lackluster looks and it was brought to Europe, where it found a home among the ancient Greeks and Romans. Both Homer and Virgil praised its perfume.

When the Roman empire tumbled into ruin, the hyacinth fell out of favor. It didn't return to vogue until the 1500s, when it was adopted by Dutch hybridizers, who transformed the pale *orientalis* into the classy cultivars that reign today. By the mid-18th Century, it was as big as powdered wigs. No less a trend setter than Madame de Pompadour, the paramour of French King Louis XV, was one of its biggest boosters. In her day, she could do for plants what Oprah Winfrey nowadays does for books. She made sure that hyacinths bloomed throughout the gardens of Versailles and had them forced to fill the palace with fragrance during the winter.

If you want to do more with hyacinths, you'll have to wait till fall to buy the bulbs. But it's never too early to get acquainted with them. *Hyacinthus*, as the genus is known botanically, is a member of the lily family. At one time, the genus contained about 30 species but it's been reorganized over the years to a mere three. Only one of them, *Hyacinthus orientalis*, has garden-worthy descendants thanks to the Dutch growers who perfected them over the centuries.

They're flowers of many faces that change over their life spans. They start off as stately, elegant hybrids but after several years as they become naturalized, they turn into delicate blooms that show traces of their forebears. The mature plants with their thick flower coats look grand along walkways and around mailboxes. They work well when planted in groups among your evergreens. And, as you might expect, they star in containers and window boxes. And don't forget to smell the hyacinths as well as the roses. "Hyacinths," says my friend Sally Ferguson of the bulb information center, "smell like hyacinths. They blow all the competition out of the water." I'm still sniffing. ●



Hyacinths make sense, as well as scents: They are hardy, elegant and inspiring — a perfect addition to a spring garden.