



GREEN TIPS

Department of Horticulture - Michigan State University

BUYING BULBS

Bulbs are required by law to be pest- and disease free and to undergo routine inspection by the state Departments of Agriculture before being put on the shelf to be sold. Many bulbs are imported from the Netherlands and are inspected there by the U.S. Department of Agriculture before shipment.

Keep the following in mind when buying bulbs:

1) Look for large bulbs. The larger the bulb, the more food is available to nurture developing blossoms. Larger bulbs usually cost more, but they also produce more and larger flowers. Smaller bulbs can be quite satisfactory in your garden, but below a certain size, they may not bloom the year that they are planted, though they should in future years.

Bulbs are often graded and sold by circumference. Many hybrid daffodils, however are graded by weight because a single bulb may actually consist of two or more bulbs united at their base, resulting in a form that cannot be measured by circumference.

2) Avoid root plate damage. Look at the bottom side of each bulb. If it's nicked or scarred, do not purchase it because root growth may be poor. Lilly bulbs should have a few large, firm roots still attached to the basal plate.

3) Avoid moldy and shrivelled bulbs. Mold or decay indicates poor quality or disease. Shrivelling indicates water loss, which is often due to improper storage. bulbs should normally be firm and plump.

4) Avoid soft, sour-smelling or lightweight bulbs. Occasionally, a bulb (tulip, especially) may look normal but has lost most of its weight to a fungal disease. Such bulbs will not bloom and should be avoided.

The following are some measurement of top grade bulbs (with circumferences shown in centimeters).

Crocus	9 - 10
Dutch iris	8
Fritillaria	20
Giant onion	20
Hyacinth, bedding quality	15 - 16
Hyacinth, forcing quality	22
Lily	12
Tulip hybrids	11 - 12

5) Buy from a reputable source. Word-of-mouth can lead you to a reliable garden center. Mail order is also a popular route. Several bulb catalogs are listed in the “Mail-Order Bulb

Sources” section of this bulletin. Gardening neighbors can be a source of bulbs, too.

6) Buy in quantity. Often, the more bulbs you buy, the lower the price per bulb will be. Try ordering with a friend or several neighbors to get the discount. Prebagged bulbs are often the best bargain in garden shops, but they may be damaged by improper storage. This is a problem particularly with lilies and dahlias. On the other hand, by buying prebagged bulbs, you avoid bulbs that have accidentally fallen into the wrong box in a bulk, pick-your-own display.

7) Be wary of sales. There are good sales and bad sales. An early discount is probably a good buy. But a picked-over late-season sale may net you only low-quality shrivelled bulbs along with a few saved dollars. As with most seasonal items, the earlier you shop, the better the selection - but you are likely to pay the full price.

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