Naturalizing Bulbs in Turf

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Meadows studded with flowering bulbs have been a subject of European art since late medieval times at least, as we see in the famous "Hunt of the Unicorn" tapestries in the collection of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. The motif, known as "flowery mead," was also a favorite of the backward-looking Pre-Raphaelite School of the nineteenth century. Any gardener who sees these images is likely to want to imitate them. But is it really possible?

The English garden designer and writer Christopher Lloyd described at length the flowering meadow at Great Dixter, but it's important to know that this meadow—like those in the Swiss Alps—was mown or grazed on a carefully timed schedule to control the vigor of the grasses and allow the bulbs and perennials to complete as much of their life cycle as possible. Annual meadows are a great feature of North America's Pacific coast, but I recall—in a "Sunset" magazine article about imitating them in the home garden—where a writer admitted that the space devoted to this display had to be treated at intervals with herbicide to control the grasses and coarse weeds that would otherwise dominate it quickly.

Experiments and Happy Accidents

Even though I came to regard the meadow garden as one of the great myths of garden designers and writers, I couldn't resist trying several versions of it over the years. Sowing annuals in disturbed soil in a pasture next to my former home in the foothills east of Portland, Oregon, worked for two years, but after that nothing but California poppies and *Gilia capitata* (the latter is native here) survived.

In the garden of my former home, there was a little round lawn on one of the terraces, and I considered it next. I planted a few hundred crocus corms there, mostly select varieties of *Crocus tommasinianus* because I had seen it naturalized in many Portland lawns. It turned out very well, and I found that one reason this is such a good species for naturalizing is that its leaves tend to lie horizontally more than vertically, so that one

can mow the grass in spring without harming it. Dutch crocuses (large forms of *C. vernus*) are often naturalized in grass, but their coarse vertical foliage will be damaged by mowing. That garden was plagued by voles, which eat crocus corms, but they didn't bother those in the lawn. I suspect the dense grass roots deterred their burrowing.

The bulb frames that I used to protect some bulb species from cold, wet winters at my former place were out in a field of perennial grasses and weeds, and after a few years seedling crocuses began to appear in the field despite the density and coarseness of the grass. Ants probably dispersed the seeds. *Crocus kotschyanus* was one, and *C. pulchellus* another. The latter also spread into a mown lawn in front of the house. These are both fall bloomers.

In a Mediterranean climate, fall-blooming crocuses and other bulbs are excellent choices for growing in lawns or more naturalistic grassy areas because they flower before the grasses make their winter growth. In the fields of Greece and Turkey, such species as *Crocus goulimyi, C. boryi,*

OPPOSITE TOP: *Narcissus bulbocodium.* **ABOVE:** *Crocus niveus.* Both species are small and good candidates for the lawn.

C. niveus, C. hadriaticus, and even the cherished *C. mathewii* can be seen blooming in grass—often in spaces where sheep have grazed earlier in the year, leaving the turf very short. *Sternbergia lutea* (winter daffodil) and *S. sicula* also grow in grass.

Starting from Scratch

In my current garden in the suburbs of Portland, Oregon, I planned a bulb lawn from the beginning. I started with an area that had been torn up by trucks bringing in building materials and soil amendments. I sprayed it with the herbicide glyphosate and later tilled it. I had a pile of sod that had been stripped off to make perennial and shrub beds, so I decided to lay it on the bare area, although it wasn't the deep, lush product obtained from sod farms. I had baskets of miscellaneous bulbs, rescued from the plunge sand in the bulb frames, and in late September I literally threw them down, along with about 400 *Crocus tommasinianus* 'Whitwell Purple' and some mixed lavender and white Dutch crocuses, and laid the sod over them. A few weeks later I went to the old garden and dug up a hundred or so bulbs of *Narcissus obvallaris* from a low-lying area, where they were naturalized in dense grass and had increased greatly, and planted them with a sharp trowel in the new bulb lawn, too.

Two springs have passed since then, and the bulb lawn is a joy—from the purple crocuses in March to the bright yellow daffodils that flower through April. After that, it is not such a joy because I have to leave it unmown until the daffodils ripen their foliage in mid-June. However, three gigantic Douglas firs overshadow the area, keeping the grass a bit under control with their wide-spreading roots, and I let the grass go dormant in summer so that it's very short when fall comes with its coolness and rain.

Suitable Species

What pops up from my random baskets of bulbs is always a nice surprise. The first flower in fall is *Acis autumnalis* (formerly *Leucojum autumnale*), which can be rather weedy in gardens here. There are some small-to-medium *Colchicum* species, notably *C. boissieri*, which spreads rapidly by horizontally extending corms. Then come the crocuses, mostly *C. kotschyanus* with a sprinkling of *C. boryi* and *C. hadriaticus. Crocus pallasii*

appeared this fall. I may try *C. goulimyi,* too; it wasn't hardy in my other garden but the microclimate is warmer here.

This past spring, several *Fritillaria* species showed up, including the western American *F. affinis* and *F. biflora* and the Mediterranean *F. messanensis*, which I once photographed on a grassy terrace on Crete. Some of the low-growing *Ornithogalum* species got in and are very pretty flowering just at ground level; they're not as invasive as the star of Bethlehem, *O. umbellatum*, which can be seen naturalized in many parts of North America. A taller "thog" that likes the turf is *O. nutans* with its curiously beautiful, nodding, gray-and-white bells.

Some of the little *Narcissus* species, more likely to be seen in rocky places in nature, are happy here—including *N. calcicola* and *N. rupicola.* Even *N. cantabricus* made a brave appearance. (The usual little narcissus for naturalizing in grass is *N. bulbocodium*, the hoop petticoat daffodil, and I'll add some of those; subsp. *obesus* has lax foliage that would escape the mower.) Eventually, too, there will be *Cyclamen hederifolium*, which I planted under the Douglas firs; in this area, it often turns up in lawns, spreading with the help of ants.

All these species are short enough to look natural in short grass. If you have an area of taller perennial grass, you might want to plant some of the western American bulbs in the Themidaceae—taller species of *Dichelostemma, Brodiaea* and *Triteleia*. Grassy meadows, dry in summer, are their natural habitat. All of these species are very easy to raise from seed. Rather than growing them in grass, I've planted mine in a chaparral type of shrub garden atop a dry slope. The summer-dry meadow is also the natural home of many *Calochortus* species, though I haven't planted any of these mostly California natives because I think the rainy season here is just too long for most of them to tolerate. *Colchicum* has many species that grow naturally in grass, and if you leave the grass high, their spring-growing leaves will not be obtrusive. In a shady spot, you could try *Arum* species.

Bulb Lawn Tips

Here are some hints about developing a bulb lawn. First, choose an area where the grass doesn't grow very well—perhaps where the soil is naturally poor, or there are greedy tree roots. This will keep the grass from out-competing the bulbs—though, as mentioned above, some crocuses grew in very dense pasture for me. If you want to make a big planting, it's worth hiring a landscaper to lift the sod with a machine; leave the strips of sod in place and just flip them over and back as you place the bulbs under them. If you do this at the right time of year, when the grass is about to make its fall growth spurt, it won't die.

Otherwise, the best planting tool is a geologist's trowel—a long, narrow, very sturdy implement that you can stab into the turf, or even pound in with a rubber mallet. Once it's in the ground, rock the trowel a little to open a planting hole and drop in your bulb. Large-scale naturalistic planting of bulbs also can be done by two people working together, one opening planting holes with a small spade and the other crawling along placing the bulbs.

One thing the garden designers get right about bulb lawns is the principle of planting in drifts of single species or varieties. You can toss out handfuls of one variety and just plant them where they fall to get a pleasing distribution. In my bulb lawn, the crocuses are mostly through the middle and lower edge of the area, and the

ABOVE: *Dichelostemma capitatum* is great for growing in a meadow of taller perennial grasses.
FACING PAGE: The western native *Fritillaria affinis* is short enough to look natural in short grass.

narcissus in groups higher up the slope. This allows me to mow the lower part, near the road, earlier in the spring.

What you choose to plant will depend on your climate, but it's best to research the choices and concentrate on those that grow naturally in grassy habitats. Most good reference books include habitat information. My experience is strictly with summer-dormant bulbs, except for the genera I grow in irrigated perennial borders. Start with inexpensive kinds, but avoid thugs such as *Muscari armeniacum*. (There are better-behaved *Muscari* species and hybrids for the lawn.) Decide how much height you're willing to tolerate; if you can't leave the grass long for a while, you may have to resign yourself to annual replanting, which wouldn't be that bad if the space is quite small. In addition, be aware of how long the bulbs stay in growth. For example, *Anemone coronaria* is a gorgeous meadow species, but it stays in active growth here well into summer. I have it in the border, not the grass, so I can get some summer mowing done.

One important note: Don't apply broadcast lawn herbicide, including "weed-and-feed" products. It will kill your bulbous plants along with the dandelions. However, you can spot-spray dandelions, hawkweed and other coarse weeds with glyphosate when the bulbs are dormant. If you can stand it, leave the veronica and chickweed alone—they are natural companions of most of these bulbs.

Keep the grass short during the bulbs' dormant season—not just to keep your turf looking tidy, but to prevent the grass from smothering emerging fall bulb flowers. I try to cut the grass in December after the fall bulbs have finished. If all the bulbs you've planted are very short-growing, you can mow as usual in spring. But with my daffodils and a few other kinds, I—or rather, my neighbors—have to tolerate a modest-sized hayfield until mid-June. The neighbors all think I'm crazy anyway, but I get many compliments on the early spring flowers, and the lawn has inspired at least one new crocus grower. ❧

Originally published in "The Bulb Garden" newsletter and reprinted with permission from the Pacific Bulb Society. For information on membership, visit www.pacificbulbsociety.org.

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ABOVE: *Narcissus cantabricus,* a short species that is good for naturalizing in a lawn.