



## **WARM CLIMATE BULBS**

by Julia Hancock

It's always amazing how something so dry, brown and hard as a bulb or corm can produce flowers as glorious as jonquils, ranunculus and snowflakes, and yet year after year they can be relied upon to create a wonderful spring display. Growing beautiful bulbs is one of the great joys of gardening, and they're almost ridiculously easy to cultivate.

### **WHAT CAN I PLANT?**

An enormous range of bulbs are now available in garden centres, supermarkets, nurseries and hardware stores with staff on hand to advise the best types to plant in your garden. But the most exciting way to buy bulbs is by mail order, and when a large parcel arrives packed with all sorts of goodies it feels like Christmas has come early. Buying bulbs this way usually offers a larger selection from which to choose, and they are often cheaper than those sold in retail outlets, especially if you are buying in bulk.

### **THE BEST BULBS FOR WARM REGIONS ARE:**

**Babiana:** commonly known as the baboon flower, the value of this South African bulb lies in its vivid blue and purple flowers — colours not normally found in the spring garden.

**Chincherinchee:** florists love these white flowers because they readily absorb dye and last for weeks in a vase.

**Freesias:** these are worth growing for the perfume alone and because they make a great cut flower. Freesias come in yellow, mauve, pink, red, white and blue. The 'Bergunden' hybrids are an improved strain producing large, either single or double, blooms. Good drainage is important.

**Ipheion:** starry, pale mauve flowers appear in profusion over many weeks during spring. They clump up quickly and are best displayed in a mass planting.

**Ixia:** the corn lily produces cream, orange, white and yellow blooms which should be planted in groups to command attention.

**Lachenalia bulbifera:** grows well in warmer areas and coastal districts, where it can receive good drainage and plenty of sun. The unusual heads of yellow-orange flowers are produced on short stems, making this a useful plant for the edge of borders.

**Narcissus spp.:** jonquils come in a wide range of shapes and colours from pure white to



Baboon flower (Babiana)



Red lilies



apricot, often with contrasting cups. The multi-flowered 'Erlicheer' is one of the best with large heads of creamy, perfumed, double blooms on long stems. An excellent cut flower.

**Ranunculus:** if strong colours are what you are after, then ranunculus is the bulb, or more correctly, corm, for you. It comes in velvety royal purple, saffron yellow, pure white, shocking pink, flame orange and strawberry red.

**Snowflakes:** often confused with the English snowdrop, these dainty, white bell-shaped flowers are distinguished by the green spot near the tip of each petal.

**Sparaxis:** the common name harlequin flower refers to its wide range of single and multi-coloured flowers.

**Sprekelia:** the pure red Jacobinian lily should be more widely grown because it is spectacular and can be left undisturbed for several years. Protect from hot sun.

**Tritonia:** similar to freesias and sparaxis in appearance, tritonias are late season bloomers which are useful for filling the gap between spring and summer.

## HOW TO PLANT AND MAINTAIN YOUR BULBS

Bulbs prefer well-drained, slightly acid soil which has been prepared in advance with the addition of organic compost or well-rotted cow manure. Clay soil should be broken up with gypsum before planting. As a general rule, bulbs should be planted to a depth twice that of their size. Make sure the narrowest end, or neck, is at the top. Backfill the planting hole gently to avoid damaging the growing tip.

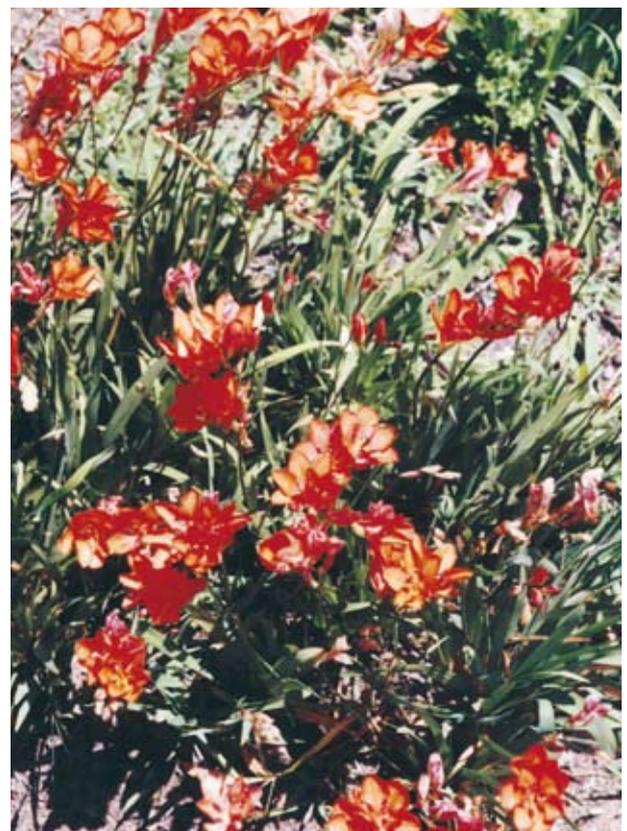
Gardeners with the luxury of space should plant bulbs in large drifts, clumps and islands for maximum impact. Many, such as jonquils and snowflakes can be left to naturalise and multiply on their own for a number of years.

**Hot tip:** If your garden is small, plant your bulbs into a large plastic pot and sink it into the ground. When your bulbs have finished flowering simply lift the pot out and store it in a cool dry place until next year. This is also a good idea if your garden is subjected to excessive summer heat.

Lower growing bulbs such as jonquils, ipheion and ranunculus make excellent pot plants for sunny balconies and patios. Use a specially formulated bulb planting mix in a pot with generous drainage holes. For a



Autumn crocus (Zephyranthes)





dense display plant bulbs in two layers approximately 10cm apart. Keep moist but not wet. Bulbs store their own food for use during the current season's flowering and should therefore be fed with a soluble fertiliser when the flowers have finished but before the foliage has died back. For this reason it is essential to resist the temptation to cut off straggly foliage until it is completely dead.

## JULIE LAKE'S 10 BEST BULBS



Star flowers (Ipheion)



Hippeastrum (Amaryllis)



Jacobian lily (Sprekelia)

Bulb plants are so easy to grow and give so much glorious reward in the garden for so little effort. Wondering which bulbs to choose? Here's my tip for the 10 best bulbs for warm climates — you can even grow them during the cool season in tropical highland areas, provided they have really good drainage.

- **Amaryllis:** The ever-popular Belladonna Lily whose rose pink flowers appear for a long time from summer to autumn.
- **Babiana:** So pretty and easy to grow for a spring show. Deep purple is the best-known colour but others are available.
- **Cyrtanthus:** Known as Ifafa Lily, this dainty little flower in shades of pink is good for planting under trees.
- **Freesia:** A must for every garden, not only because of the wide range of colours and forms, but because of its heavenly smell which sweetens the air in spring.
- **Hymenocallis:** Evergreen, so it always looks good in the garden, the spidery white flowers add a cool touch in spring and summer.
- **Ixia:** A good plant for rock gardens and dry spots; very dainty, in several colours. Flowers in late winter and spring.
- **Lachenalia:** Red, yellow or orange bells brighten the garden in winter and spring.
- **Sprekelia:** The bright red flowers with golden centres add a warm touch to late winter and early spring gardens.
- **Watsonia:** A very good warm climate bulb for spring and summer, in all sorts of lovely colours.
- **Zephyranthes:** Sometimes called Autumn Crocus or Storm Flower because it usually flowers after rain. Despite the name it can appear sporadically from summer through autumn.