

Episode 121 show notes and advice

Episode description

Have you ever wondered what you can do to make your favourite bulbs more perennial? In this episode, Sarah explains the super simple, sustainable, and cost-effective steps you can take to enable your best-loved bulbs to return year after year.

In this episode, discover:

- The best bulbs for naturalised drifts of colour
- Sarah's secrets for perennializing tulip bulbs
- The Perch Hill recipe for homemade fungicide

episode 121 advice sheet

Recognising tulip fire (1:18)

As your tulips begin to flower, it's important to check for tulip blight, also known as tulip fire. Sarah explains that your tulips will look as if they have been through a hailstorm. The leaves will be permeated with pockmarks, and you will see similar smaller burn-like marks on the petals too.

The marks won't be everywhere, so be sure to properly investigate. The growth also won't emerge straight and perky, and instead, will have a gnarled appearance. If you spot the signs, act quickly. Take a spade or a long-handed trowel, remove the bulb from the soil, and destroy it.

It can be very costly for diseased bulbs to end up on a compost heap, as the fungal spores can contaminate the rest of the compost heap and ultimately, the rest of the garden.

At Perch Hill, Sarah, and the team, are also trialling preventative measures to keep tulip fire under control. This mainly includes creating an organic mix, which they have had huge success with when treating ranunculus.

Ranunculus are famously prone to mildew, particularly in dry and warm spring.

Homemade fungicide (3:43)

To make the organic mix to combat mildew and fungal disease, combine the following in a spray bottle:

- Bicarbonate of soda (diluted in water)
- Two or three drops of sunflower oil
- Two or three drops of washing-up liquid

The oil and the soap will help the bicarbonate of soda stick to the leaves of the plant, which should stop the mildew in its tracks. This will also allow you to forgo chemical pesticides and fungicides which could have harmful effects on biodiversity in your garden, and kill mycorrhiza, the most essential component for healthy soil.

Getting good value from your bulbs (5:04)

Sarah says there are tried and tested ways to get your bulbs to return year after year. At Perch Hill, the team finds that alliums, narcissus, and hyacinths are reliably perennial, which means that return year after year, and naturalise gently.

Hyacinths

If you have any hyacinths that you have forced from early in the year, plant them out now (late spring) at the same depth as they were in the soil in the pot, even if they have leaves still on them.

Place them on the edge of a path, so they can benefit from the sunlight. Sarah explains that this method has been really effective for producing vases of hyacinths for many months at a time. You will be able to tell they have naturalised, because the bulbs will be 'naturally' very close together, unlike if you had planted them yourself!

The mother bulb will have given its energy to the bulbils beneath the soil, which will then go on to reproduce year after year in wonderful, naturalised drifts. This applies to all sorts of plants and flowers you might have planted in borders.

Sarah loves *Hyacinthus orientalis* 'Anastasia' (Multiflora) in the orchard, which she says is very delicate, and looks as if it's been crossed with a bluebell.

Alliums

Alliums will naturalise in the same way as hyacinths, with grit at the bottom of their holes. Sarah planted *Allium cristophii* around 20 years ago, and although the garden around it has changed, the plant has remained the same, subtly naturalising. This plant is also very easy to perennialize.

Narcissus

An absolute favourite at Perch Hill, which has been growing in a specific area of the Highlands in Scotland since 1860, where it was originally planted and naturalised. Sarah was taken by the double, *Narcissus 'Albus Plenus Odoratus'* on a visit, which she explains flowers in May like the classic pheasant's eye variety.

They are avoided by animals like sheep, which makes them a stand-out choice for growing and naturalising around abundant wildlife, particularly in orchards.

Bulb sustainability: tulips (11:55)

Variety

Sarah says that for bulb sustainability, tulips are a particularly important family. After rigorous research, there are a few lessons to take away when it comes to perennializing tulip bulbs...

Sarah explains that variety is exceptionally important for creating a perennial garden of tulips. In particular, the *Viridiflora* group, which is characterised by its green flashes, and is reliably perennial.

Varieties such as Tulips 'Spring Green,' 'Greenland,' 'Artist,' 'Golden Artist' and the new, 'Orange Marmalade' are stand-out choices. The latter, Sarah has planted in the rhubarb bed at Perch Hill as they thrive in dappled shade.

Darwin Hybrids are another excellent perennial group. 'Ivory Floradale' is particularly perennial and a favourite at Perch Hill. Similarly, the 'Impression Series' which have been returning year after year for nearly a decade.

The Species Group is great for naturalising in grass for perennial drifts of flowers. Tulip turkestanica is a lovely choice, along with Tulip praestans 'Shogun.' The 'Emperor Series' is also very reliable.

There are also other favourites that Sarah also says perennialize well, including:

- Tulip 'Ballerina' (Lily Flowered Group)
- Tulip 'Sarah Raven' (Lily Flowered Group)
- Tulip 'Black Parrot' (Parrot Group)
- Tulip 'Mistress Mystic' (Triumph Group)

Planting depth

Even though Perch Hill has heavy clay soil, Sarah says they use a bulb planter which works well for penetrating the dense soil and is effective at placing the bulbs at the correct depth, of around four inches.

Sarah says that the depth of the bulb is essential, as this prevents the bulbs from getting too hot. When a tulip bulb becomes too warm, it is given the impetus to reproduce and promotes bulbil formation, which should be avoided.

Planting location

Where you choose to plant the bulbs also plays an important role in perennialization. Placing tulip bulbs in a warm but unpromising place often produces good results.

At Perch Hill, the tulip bulbs have been planted at the base of the south side of an old privet hedge and apple tree. And because the soil is baked dry, and impoverished with little nutritional value, the bulbs have actually thrived. In nature, this is often where you will find wild tulips.

Pest control

Be wary of squirrels, rats, and mice, that might eat your bulbs once planted.

- Sarah suggests forgetting the chicken wire (which is often costly and ineffective).
- Old grills from ovens are effective, but very ugly.
- Chilli powder and chilli flakes used to be effective at Perch Hill, but no longer work as squirrels have populated.

- The most effective tactic has been pruning the roses back in October and November as they go into dormancy. Instead of putting the rose stems onto the compost heap, they are cut into 45cm pieces and stored and scattered as a top layer over pots and borders working as an effective deterrent.