Stretching Spring

By Christine Farrow

April 12, 2013

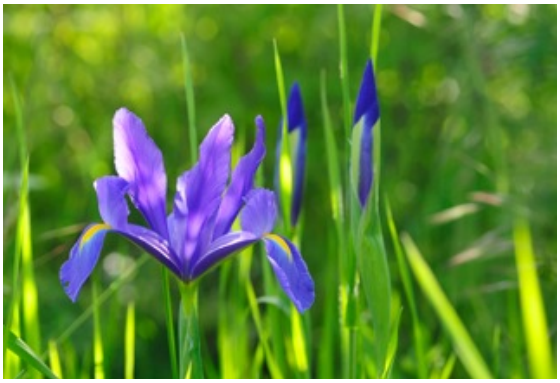
A wide variety of geophytes for Western Washington

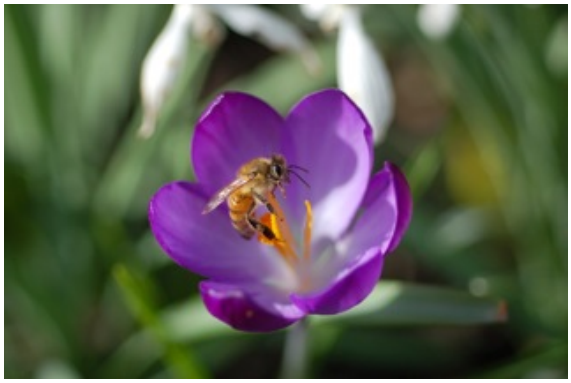
Let's start with the term *geophyte.* A simple definition is "a perennial plant that propagates by means of buds below the soil surface."

We often call all geophytes "bulbs," but they may actually be bulbs, corms, tubers or rhizomes. They are tiny little brown packages that we plant into the earth in the fall, sometimes even forgetting where we planted them. Bulbs are easy and so rewarding *if* we plant them in the right location.

Almost all bulbs prefer loamy or sandy ground with good drainage. The camas is an exception. It loves to be planted in a wet clay soil that will dry out during the summer. It will spread by offsets and self-seeding, so that in a few years your display will be stunning.

With our mild Western Washington climate spring can arrive in late February with delicate snowdrops (*Galanthus nivalis*) and can continue through June with the blue spires of our native camas (*Camassia quamash*).

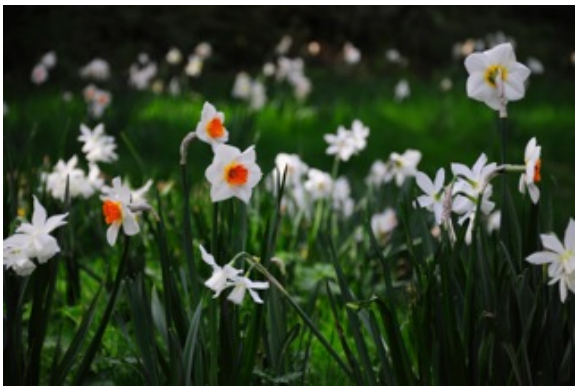




Left: Native to Southern Spain and Northern Africa the Dutch iris now adds an elegant accent to the edge of a woodland garden in the Northwest. **Right:** Sometimes blooming as early as February, the crocus offers food to another early riser, the honeybee. *Photos by Christine Farrow / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners*

Trilliums, fawn lilies, chocolate lilies, nodding onions and wild iris were all thriving when the First People began to cultivate and harvest the common camas as a food crop. The bulbs were grown in open grassy meadows and dug when the flower stalks could still be identified to distinguish the edible blue camas from the poisonous death camas (*Zigadenus venenosus*) with its white blossoms.

When the Europeans arrived, they brought with them daffodil and tulip bulbs. It is still possible to locate the site of an early settler's cabin by the golden daffodils that naturalized in the surrounding deciduous woodland; a good indicator that daffodil bulbs are deer resistant. The daffodils do contain calcium oxalate, an irritant to animals but apparently not to slugs.



A field of Red Hill and Thalia daffodils add a bright touch to a sloping drainfield in early May. The bulbs are left to naturalize along with taller grasses; the field is cut once a year in the autumn, minimizing soil compaction issues. *Photo by Christine Farrow / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners*

Many available bulbs will naturalize, which means that they will return and multiply each spring if allowed to remain in the ground. Check your catalog or ask your nursery professional for the best candidates for your yard.

To encourage the bulbs to naturalize and rebloom year after year, leave the foliage intact to photosynthesize and feed the bulbs. Cutting or tying the leaves will reduce the strength gathering in the underground bulb or corm. Allow other perennials or grasses with similar water needs to grow up to mask the decaying foliage. When the leaves have completely died back, they may be cut or pulled.

Spring flowering bulbs require lots of light while they are growing and blooming. As they enter their dormant period, they really don't care if they are tucked into the deep shade of a maple or other deciduous tree. Galanthus, scilla and muscari are especially lovely in a woodland garden. When the leaves drop in the fall, leave them in place to protect the bulbs and nourish the soil.

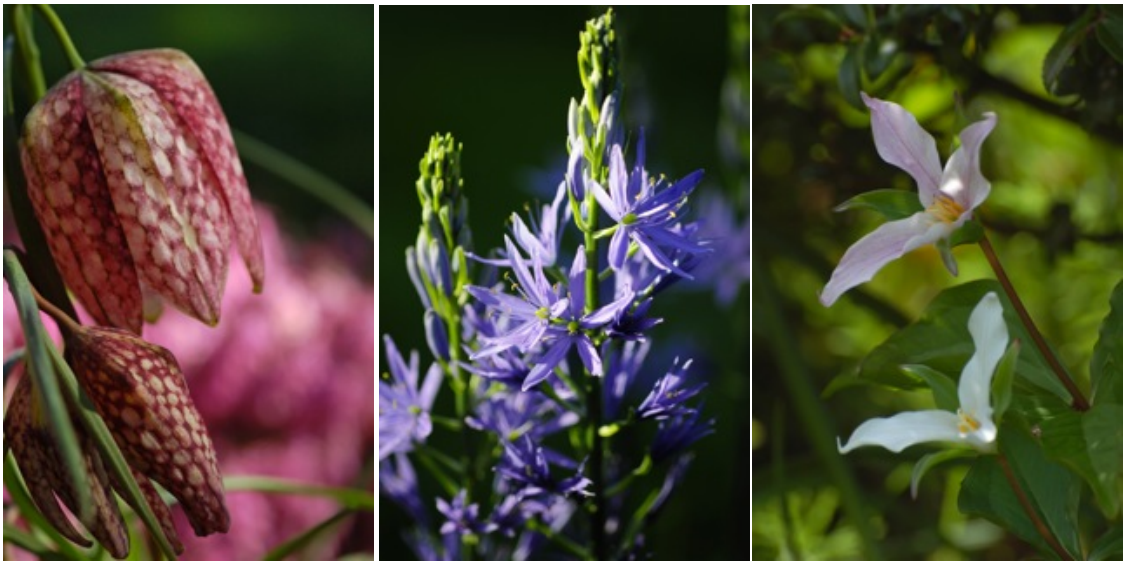
After WWII, commercial bulb production grew to become a major economic factor in the Skagit Valley, but it also brought a much wider selection of bulbs from all over the world that grow exceedingly well in our climate. Dutch iris, alliums, hyacinths, crocus, cyclamen, winter aconite and anemones are just a few of the geophytes that will stretch spring from weeks into months.

Dutch iris (*Iris hollandica*) are native to the Mediterranean regions of Spain and Morocco, areas with cool wet winters but very hot dry summers. The bulbs have been hybridized in The Netherlands for hundreds of years; that's how they became Dutch iris. Plant them in a full sun area of your garden and avoid summer watering while the bulbs are dormant.

Blue-eyed grass (*Sisyrinchium sp.*) is not a grass at all but a petite member of the family Iridaceae, the same family as the Dutch Iris. Their leaves are slender and small, resembling grass until the cheerful flowers appear for a few weeks in late spring. Blue-eyed grass and yellow-eyed grass have widely different habitat requirements from dry

rock gardens to the moist edge of a pond. You're bound to find one that is perfect for your setting.

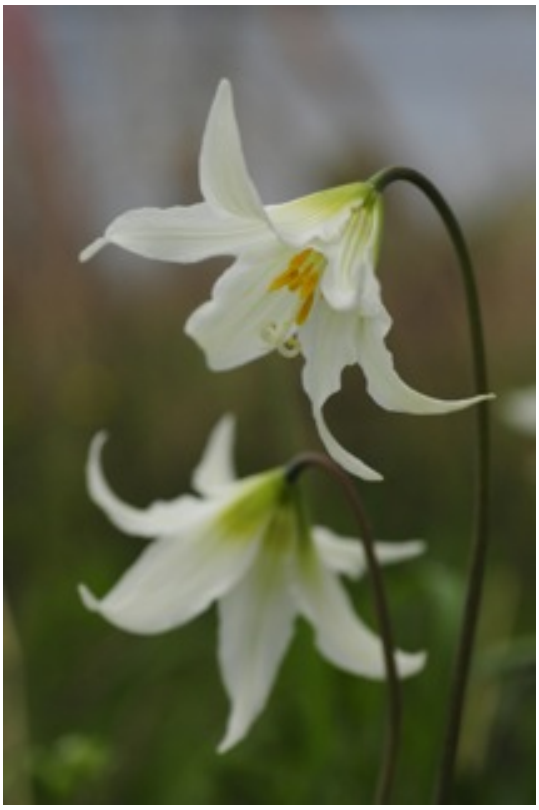
Nodding onion, fools onion, and Hookers onion are among the many species of alliums that are native to Western Washington, so it's not surprising that many tall growing alliums from Asia and the Middle East adapt themselves well to our gardens. Tucking a few of the tall varieties into the back of a perennial border will add a brilliant jolt of color in early summer.



Left: Fritillaria,a garden show favorite this year, with its tiny checkerboard or white blossoms is a domesticated bulb related to our wild checker lily (Fritillaria affinis). This small bulb combines well with winter blooming heather in an urban rock garden. **Center:** The great camas (Camassia leichtlinii) prefers a sunny meadow or the back of a tall perennial border where it can dry out completely during its dormant period during summer. A native to Western Washington, the large bulbs are readily available through catalogs or local nurseries. **Right:** Our western trillium (*Trillium ovatum*) grows best in a deciduous forest where it remains undisturbed. As the flowers open they will change from white to a deep wine color. *Photos by Christine Farrow / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners*

What could be prettier in April than the delicate slender blossoms of fawn lilies, glacier lilies and dog-tooth violets (*Erythronium sp.*) in a gently shaded portion of your garden? These are all native to Western Washington. You may observe these exceptional flowers in the wild, but do not remove them! You'd most likely kill them immediately.

If you would like to add Northwest native spring flowers to your garden, check with your local nursery, or watch for a specialized plant sale, usually held in the spring. If you have been wondering which bulbs, corms or tubers to select for your fall planting, this is the time to go exploring. Visit demonstration gardens and take garden tours. Keep your eyes open and a pencil handy to jot down the name of that special bloom that you want to see blooming in your own garden next spring.

Left: Commonly called snowdrops, Galanthus are early bloomers that will naturalize beautifully under a deciduous tree. They will bloom in the early winter sun and sleep through the shady season of summer. **Right:** Fawn lily, an Erythronium species, is at home on an open bluff near the sea or nestled in a gently forested woodland. Like many lily bulbs it requires moist but well drained winter soil that dries out in summer. The leaves are said to resemble the ears of a fawn, hence its name. *Photos by Christine Farrow / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners*

RESOURCES:

- Timber Press Guide to Gardening in the Pacific Northwest. Carol W. Hall and Norman E. Hall. pp. 235-256. Food Plants of Coastal First Peoples. Nancy J. Turner. pp. 42-44.
- Bulbs for Garden Habitats. Judy Glattstein. pp. 19-29; 280.
- Encyclopedia of Northwest Native Plants for Gardens and Landscapes. Kathleen Robson, Alice Richter, and Marianne Filbert. pp. 329-332.
- www.soci.org/Chemistry-and-Industry/CnI-Data/2011/4/Drugs-from-DAFFODILS
- www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/consumer/factsheets/bulbs-spring/Iris_ho.htm
- www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/geophyte