



THE DIRT ON THE BULB SHOW

By Gillian Culff

Grape hyacinth *Muscari armeniacum* 'Big Smile' in good company with *Hyacinth orientalis* 'Woodstock,' *Narcissus* 'Cha Cha' and *Tulipa* 'Alibi.'

Every year in March, BBG's Fitzpatrick Greenhouse bursts with the colors and fragrances of hundreds of spring bulbs in bloom. As Senior Gardener Duke Douillet puts it, after a long New England winter, "it's a jolt of springtime when you're really desperate for it."

Perhaps you've visited the show yourself and have wondered what goes into preparing it. If so, you're in good company. On a sunny fall day, the BBG Marketing Communications department set out to get the dirt on this beloved BBG tradition from Duke and his fellow Senior Gardener, Christine Caccamo.

Unsurprisingly, preparing the Bulb Show is labor- and time-intensive; Duke and Christine work together doing a lot

of work behind the scenes to create the magic we enjoy during those few short weeks in late winter.

The first order of business? Ordering. The Garden's South African bulb collection blooms year after year, so they don't need to be re-ordered like the hardy bulbs. As far as choosing which hardys to order, says Duke, "A lot of it is learning through trial and error what works." Some plants that look great in

the catalogs are disappointing, with unimpressive blooms or foliage or vulnerability to pests like aphids. Last year's big winner? *Muscari*, or grape hyacinth. "They're reliable, they bloom for a long time, and they look nice," Duke enthuses. Tulips and daffodils are always popular, and with so many varieties, it's easy to strike a balance between the tried and true and some new choices.



This year's show will feature 70-100 container and a total of 1,400 bulbs. Christine ordered all of the hardy bulbs from Brent and Becky's in Gloucester, VA, on September 1. Worth noting: "Things can be out of stock," she informs me, "so the earlier you order, the better." BBG participates in Brent and Becky's "Bloomin' Bucks" fundraising program, which allows any purchaser to designate BBG as a recipient for a percentage of each purchase they make.

For this spring's show, Christine and Duke selected some unusual and

beautiful bulbs, among them a striking dark purple tulip with fringed petals named 'Vincent Van Gogh'; a diminutive pink-orange tulip called 'Salmon Gem'; a trio of new daffodils; and two exquisite dwarf irises, 'Harmony' and 'Pauline,' with flowers of brilliant blue and deep purple, respectively. But the star of the show might just be the enchanting *Fritillaria meleagris*, or Guinea Hen Flower, in a mix of colors. Its nodding, bell-shaped flowers vary from reddish purple checkered to black, to faintly checkered green, to pure white.

Once the order is in, Christine needs



Left: *Tulipa bakeri* 'Lilac Wonder' is lovely when forced for early blooms or naturalized in a landscape, where it is deer resistant.

Above: From the South African bulb collection, *Clivia miniata*, Natal Lily.

to sterilize those 100 containers. She also makes a written record of each bulb's cold storage requirements, which can vary from seven to nine weeks for dwarf irises to 16-18 weeks for tulips, with other bulbs falling somewhere between these extremes.

When the bulbs arrive—about five to six weeks after ordering—Christine spends hours in the Lexan Greenhouse—across a small lawn from the Fitzpatrick—filling containers with potting mix and planting them. The process is precise: the bulbs must be planted at least a finger width apart—for some, 2-4 inches—at the proper depth for their size. Tiny ones get buried, while larger ones stick out a bit. Deeper pots are needed for plants that grow tall so that the roots don't push the bulbs out of the pot.

Each container is carefully labelled with the variety, date planted and anticipated pull date—when it must come out of cold storage in order to bloom in time for the show. For each type of bulb, Christine creates two rounds, a week apart, to extend the show; a newly-blooming pot will take the place of one on the wane. "Christine has to be pretty spot on with all the record-keeping," Duke points out. This year's show is

scheduled to last two weeks—three, if the plants continue to bloom.

Once all of the bulbs are potted, Christine hauls them in batches by wagon from the Lexan Greenhouse to the basement cooler in the Center House, located on the other side of the Garden, across Route 102. Since the building is built into a hill, the basement door sits at ground level, so there's no need to navigate any stairs. The cooler is kept at 41-46 degrees, and as Christine brings the bulbs inside, she organizes them by pull-date.

While in cold storage, the containers are checked weekly and kept moist. Location in the cooler affects soil moisture; a container situated by a vent will dry out more quickly, requiring more frequent watering. Mice and chipmunks find the bulbs tasty, so the ones they like are covered with cloth.

Meanwhile, Duke handles the South African bulbs, which follow a somewhat different process. "They go dormant in response to dryness instead of cold," Duke explains. "Once they stop blooming they stay green for

a while, but then the foliage withers away, and we keep the plant in a cool, dark place until they start sprouting. That's the signal to water them again. It's a whole different regimen than the hardy bulbs."

Most of the South African bulbs were donated to the Garden in 2018, and the collection expanded with the acquisition of a few varieties. "They've been a bit hard to figure out," Duke adds. "Some bloom early, some bloom late. There are a lot of variables. You're talking about a two-week window; it's hard to get them to bloom in those two weeks out of 52." But their often-tubular blooms, welcoming to hummingbirds when grown outdoors, are captivating and striking next to the hardy varieties. Duke's favorite is the *Veltheimia bracteata*, commonly known as Forest Lily or Cape Lily, which he calls "spectacular" with its light pink flowers that bloom for months.

When the hardy bulbs come out of cold storage, they are returned from the Center House cooler to the Lexan Greenhouse, where they can acclimate

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1-14

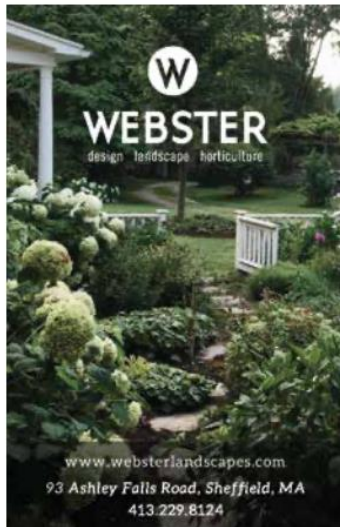
2021 Bulb Show

This year's Bulb Show will run from March 1 – 14 and is open daily, 9 a.m. – 4 p.m. Reserved, timed admission is required, and capacity controls will be in place. To reserve your free admission, visit: www.berkshirebotanical.org/visit

gradually before taking up residence in the warmer Fitzpatrick. By now, it's winter, and the ground is often snow-covered, so instead of a wagon, the bulbs ride back across the road on a sled.

Once in the warmth of the Lexan, it takes up to two weeks for the plants to "green up" and produce flowers, at which point Christine top-dresses the pots with moss, pine needles or nut shells before sending them off to Duke in the Fitzpatrick, where he handles set-up and care of the show.

First, the greenhouse has to be cleaned, benches brought in and the South African bulbs moved in



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from storage, all of which takes Duke a few days. With so many plants overwintering in the Fitzpatrick, there's always some shuffling and relocating of plants to make room for the bulbs.

Duke creates the displays intuitively, experimenting with size and color and tucking bulbs in around the remaining succulents, whose soft greens, browns and silvers provide visual contrast for the brightly-hued bulbs. Duke also collects stumps, branches and other natural props to add variety and visual appeal to the displays. For the duration of the show, he cares for the plants—watering, dead-heading faded blooms, adding trellises to prop up drooping stalks and removing plants when they're no longer fresh. He also observes performance. "Duke keeps track of what bulbs we should repeat," says Christine. "He does an evaluation with comments

on each bulb, so we always have good records for the next year."

Both gardeners admit to feeling a bit anxious in advance of the show. "There's so much you don't have control over," says Duke, "there's always a certain tension until they start blooming."

Christine agrees, "On warmer sunny days, it gets hot in the Fitzpatrick, and sometimes the flowers start to bloom faster than we want." On occasion, fast-bloomers have been removed to a cool, dark space under the tables in the Lexan in an effort to slow them down.

Even cleaning up the show when it has ended is a process. The South African plants are removed to a hot, dry location in one of the other greenhouses for the summer, where they are kept under cover. Tulips—which can only be forced once—are composted, and daffodils are taken

home by staff and replanted in their gardens, where they will bloom again in another year or two. Benches are returned to wherever they came from, and the succulents and other plants that were moved out are returned to their home in the Fitzpatrick.

Christine says her favorite part of the show is coming into the Fitzpatrick Greenhouse early in the morning and inhaling the fresh fragrance of the bulbs. "All the flowers, the colors; it's really satisfying to see it after all that work," she says, smiling.

Duke agrees. "I've been in there countless times when visitors are there, and they get so much delight and comfort out of it. You're doing something that other people enjoy, and it's nice to see that your efforts are appreciated."



Norman Rockwell (1894-1978), *The Right To Know*, detail, 1968. Look. Norman Rockwell Museum Digital Collections. ©Norman Rockwell Family Agency. All rights reserved.

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