

EARLY SPRING BULB ALERT

By Fred Rosenstiel

On the Ides of March when most bulb growth is still invisible or the young shoots are just breaking the surface your bulb bed needs special protection. All accumulated litter should be carefully removed without walking on the bed so as to leave the soil uncompacted and the bulb shoots without injury.

When the soil looks and feels dry it is a good idea to lightly loosen the caked surface with a narrow hoe or the end prongs of a rake, at the same time uprooting any tufts of grass, chickweed, dandelion or other weeds that wintered from last fall or have already started to grow. The narrow end of a metal mop holder on a broomstick could serve as a makeshift hoe.

When the litter and weeds are removed, hardly spring flowers such as pansies or forget-me-nots, which bloom after the bulbs can be carefully planted between the bulbs.

When the bulbs are in full flower, and especially after the flowers have faded they need special consideration. This consists in picking off the wilted flowers before the ripening seedpods begin to extract food from the bulb, especially tulips, daffodils and hyacinths.

It is absolutely essential to preserve and not injure all the bulb leaves until they fade in midsummer: the leaves are the lungs of the bulb on whose health will depend next season's blooms.

A dearth of early spring greens may tempt City pigeons to feast on the juicy young tulip leaves. They can be frightened off by tying black cotton thread between stakes criss-cross above the bulb bed.

After the daffodils have bloomed their mature strap-like leaves are liable to flop becoming very untidy. Tying the leaves loosely together will cause no injury and improve the landscape.

After midsummer all bulb leaves usually decay, leaving no visible trace. It is therefore important to carefully re-label the bulb varieties while they are in bloom, to prevent erroneous planting in summer or fall on top of forgotten underground spring bulbs. Since plant labels are remarkable for speedy disappearance, one should make doubly sure of bulb location with additional less destructible markers such as pieces of brick, white pebbles or bottle caps.

In any garden replanning the late summer dormancy period is the time for all transplanting of spring flowering bulbs, when the good foresight of having a well marked bulb bed, now totally bare of visible remains except for the labels, will be amply rewarded.