

Planting bulbs under trees: Go small for bigger impact

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/home/ct-sun-garden-morton-0918-20160909-story.html>

Because the bulbs of *Crocus tommasinianus* 'Ruby Giant' are so small, you can plant large numbers of them with minimal damage to tree roots. (The Morton Arboretum)

Beth BottsChicago Tribune

When you're choosing bulbs for spring bloom and you plan to plant them anywhere near trees, smaller is better.

That's the bulb size, not the plant size, said Samantha Peckham, horticulturist at The Morton Arboretum in Lisle. "Smaller bulbs are easier to tuck between the roots of trees," she said.

For example, try *Crocus tommasinianus* 'Ruby Giant'. The little bulbs, about the size of a dime, produce lavender-pink flowers in late March or early April, a couple of weeks earlier than the more common giant crocus. And since the bulbs (technically corms) are so small, you won't have to cut a lot of tree roots by digging big holes.

Trees' roots stretch far beyond their branches, just under the soil. If you have just a couple of trees in an average-sized Chicago-area yard, chances are any bed where you plant bulbs is also home to the roots of your trees.

Protect them by choosing plants that have small bulbs and live a long time, returning to re-bloom each spring. That way, you won't have to disturb the tree's roots replanting every year.

Here are some other suggestions from Peckham for small early-spring bulbs that make good tree companions. Although most spring bulb plants prefer full sun, she said, these plants also can do well under a tree because they flower before the leaves unfurl to cast them into shade.

Jetfire daffodil (*Narcissus* 'Jetfire'): This variety has yellow petals and an orange cup. "The bulbs are really little, about acorn size," she said.

Blue Giant glory-of-the-snow (*Chionodoxa forbesii* 'Blue Giant'): Glory-of-the-snow has small blue flowers with white centers that almost seem to twinkle like stars. Like all small-bulb plants, it's best planted in masses to make the greatest impact.

Lady Jane lady tulip (*Tulipa clusiana* 'Lady Jane'): With rosy-pink outer petals and a bright white interior, this delicate, low-growing tulip has a peppermint-striped look.

Pagoda trout-lily (*Erythronium 'Pagoda'*): The yellow flowers are like miniature lilies, held above wide, glossy leaves.

Planting bulbs is easy, Peckham said. Choose a spot in well-drained soil. Dig a hole three times as deep as the bulb is wide. Drop the bulb in, with the pointy (stem) end up. "Sometimes it can be hard to tell which is the top of a bulb," she said. "It's not the end of the world if you plant it upside down." The plant will find its way in spring.

If you are sure your site is clear of tree roots, you can dig a wide hole of the right depth and place several bulbs in it. But if there are any trees in the vicinity, use a slender trowel or a dibble — a pointed bulb-planting tool — to make individual small holes, avoiding major roots.

Beth Botts is a staff writer at The Morton Arboretum in Lisle (www.mortonarb.org).

For tree and plant advice, contact the Arboretum's Plant Clinic (630-719-2424).

Try something new under the trees

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/home/ct-sun-0904-garden-morton-20160824-story.html>

Maidenhair ferns (*Adiantum pedatum*) make a lovely ground cover when massed in the shade of a tree. (Chuck Berman / Chicago Tribune)

Beth Botts Chicago Tribune

Where there's a space in the shade of a tree, you always seem to find the usual ground-cover suspects: Japanese pachysandra, English ivy, creeping euonymus or myrtle.

There are more interesting alternatives, according to Katrina Chipman, horticulture coordinator at The Morton Arboretum in Lisle. Quite a few plants can do well under trees, without being aggressive (and therefore labor-intensive) like ivy and myrtle.

"Ground covers don't have to be low-growing," she said. "Any shade-tolerant perennial can be a ground cover, if you plant enough of them." The Arboretum's Ground Cover Garden is full of varied examples.

The most important thing in your ground-cover bed is something you can't see: the tree's roots. "To avoid competition with the tree roots, you're going to want to select a ground cover that doesn't have super-deep roots," Chipman said. Select a plant that is also suitable for the kind of shade the tree casts: There's more light under an open, feathery honey locust than under the dense canopy of a Norway maple.

Digging will damage the tree's roots. To avoid digging big holes, buy small ground cover plants. "Choose 4-inch pots instead of 1-gallon pots," Chipman said. The smaller ground-cover plants may take a year longer to fill in the space, but you'll do less harm to the tree.

Don't dig in compost or other amendments. Instead, spread a layer of compost on top of the soil.

Early September is a good time to plant ground covers and other perennials, Chipman said. Plan to water attentively for at least two years to help the plants get established.

Here are some of her suggestions for interesting plants to go under trees:

Rodgersia (*Rodgersia aesculifolia*): The dramatic broad leaves of this 2- to 3-foot-tall Asian plant make a statement. "It gives you a different texture," Chipman says. "And it's not going to take over." In midsummer, there are fluffs of tiny white flowers.

Barrenwort (*Epimedium*): Durable and drought-tolerant, this plant forms a mounded 1-foot-tall mass of heart-shaped leaves. It has tiny, delicate flowers in May held above the foliage on wiry stems. Species and hybrid varieties that are often available include *Epimedium x rubrum*, with red flowers and a red tint to the new leaves; *Epimedium x versicolor* 'Sulphureum', which has yellow flowers; and *Epimedium grandiflorum* 'Purple Pixie', which has purple blooms.

Ferns: "There are a lot of different ferns," Chipman says. Most need moist soil and shade: "If they get too much sun, they get sun scorch." One possibility is Japanese painted fern (*Athyrium niponicum* var. *pictum*), which has green fronds dusted with silver. Several native ferns do well in gardens, including Christmas fern, with its stiff, upright fronds (*Polystichum acrostichoides*) and delicate maidenhair fern (*Adiantum pedatum*). Another native, ostrich fern (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*), is very adaptable, but it can spread aggressively.

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