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Spring flowering bulbs can use some TLC

Spring-flowering bulbs planted in a good site will often produce flowers year after year with minimal coddling. That's not to say that they don't benefit from a little attention.

Lee Taylor, Extension home horticulture specialist at Michigan State University, suggests fertilizing bulbs lightly at flowering time with no more than one pound of 5-10-5 fertilizer per 50 square feet. Sprinkle the fertilizer on the soil around the plants, taking care to keep fertilizer off the leaves and roots — It will burn them.

Drought is rarely a spring problem, but if dry weather does persist more than a week, growing bulbs may need a thorough soaking.

Cutting the flowers from bulbs won't hurt them, Taylor notes. In fact, removing the flowers after they begin to fade will allow the bulb to direct all the energy produced by the foliage into the bulb to prepare it for next year's flower display, rather than into seed production. If you don't cut flowers for bouquets and arrangements, at least snip off fading blossoms.

Leave the foliage in place, however, until it turns yellow and starts to dry. The foliage makes the food that is stored in the bulb. Remove the foliage while it's still green, and you reduce the bulb's potential for growth and

flower production next year. After leaves turn yellow, cut and destroy stems and foliage to reduce the likelihood of disease carryover to new growth next year.

"If you don't like looking at the yellowing foliage, consider planting flowering annuals among the bulbs to camouflage it," Taylor suggests.

Bulbs to be moved should be dug after the foliage has died but before it's disappeared so you can easily locate the bulbs. Bulbs dug while the foliage is still green won't have the food reserves to establish a root system in the fall and flower in the spring.

Dig bulbs carefully to avoid damaging them. Remove all loose soil and place bulbs in shallow trays, mesh sacks or old nylon stockings to dry in a cool, well ventilated place for several weeks. Discard any bulbs that rot.

After bulbs are dry, divide large clumps and place bulbs in a cool, dry location in shallow trays or porous sacks until planting time in the fall.

