

Gardener vs. squirrel: Keeping her bulbs safe

Thursday, January 24, 2008

I'll kick myself for putting this in print and tempting fate (with my luck, as soon as tomorrow), but this winter's thousands of tulip bulbs have been in the ground for a month at my house, and the squirrels are not eating them.

Maybe I only planted several hundred, but it felt like thousands. And after last winter's experience with squirrels, who relished almost my entire inventory of tulips, species tulips, scillas, English hyacinths, Star-of-Bethlehem, grape hyacinths and other minor bulbs, why did I ever buy bulbs again?

I tried potions and lotions and hexes – just about every commercial and folkloric remedy that popped into my inbox, except those involving bloodshed. Still, the squirrels feasted on my future flowers, and I got hives from one of the bottled deterrents for my trouble.

Regarding the hives, I should probably mention that I did not follow the manufacturer's instructions precisely. With so many bulbs to plant, I did not have the patience to spray each bulb individually. I dunked them by the dozen into a bowl of the stuff and laid each one, bare-handed, on a cookie sheet to dry before planting. Had I worn gloves, I probably would not have had the skin reaction; the squirrels mostly left those relatively few treated bulbs alone.

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As this winter's bulb-planting time rolled around, I had a new deterrent to try. A reader suggested I dust bulbs in medicated foot powder before planting them. It had to be *medicated* powder, she said. And, yes, there are foot powders on the pharmacy shelves that are not medicated, but I did not dare veer from my written instructions.

I settled on Gold Bond Medicated Foot Powder, providing "genuine medicated relief since 1908." The label says menthol is the active ingredient, but it also contains eucalyptus and peppermint oils. The 10-ounce family-size sells for \$8.99 at Walgreen's.

I was relieved how easy it is to apply to bulbs, not having previous experience with foot powders, medicated or not. I dumped several dozen tulips in a paper grocery sack and added a few shakes of the powder, which is mostly fine talc. I closed the grocery sack and shook it gently. When I looked inside the sack I saw each and every bulb was uniformly coated with the fine powder.

I dug my tulip holes and plopped them in. On top of the deeply planted tulips I added species tulips and Spanish bluebell bulbs half their size, and on top of those I pushed tiny grape hyacinth and crocus bulbs into the soft earth. I'm going for a layered look come blooming season.

TELL US

I did not dust narcissus bulbs, which should have been planted weeks earlier, in foot powder. *Narcissus*, bulb growers will tell you, are poisonous to mammals, including rats and squirrels.

A cousin in Tacoma says gardeners there top their soil with a layer of finely crushed oyster shell to deter squirrels from digging. Because I keep garden chickens, who need grit added to their food to make their eggs' shells hard, I had a small amount of oyster shell on hand.

I sprinkled a layer on top of the soil in a few flowerpots in which I had planted tulip bulbs dusted in foot powder. When the layer of crushed material remained undisturbed for two weeks, I drove to Southland Farm Store on Maple Avenue and bought 10 pounds of it, at 50 cents a pound.

I'm not ready to cover my entire property in a layer of white oyster shells, but I topped off all my planted containers with it. When I plant extra-expensive bulbs in a bed, I'll add a layer of crushed shells for protection against the varmints. I'll probably camouflage the white shells with a bit of compost. The point is, once the paws hit the gritty layer I hope it will be the squirrel equivalent of fingernails on chalkboard.

I may have discovered a third squirrel deterrent, too. Last year I nailed a cedar squirrel feeder to the backyard fence. It has a hinged top, a Plexiglas front and a shelf at its base for seed spill-over. I'm careful to keep it filled with dried corn, sunflower seeds and whole peanuts.

It took the squirrel hordes several months to rely on the feeder for daily meals, too late to save last spring's tulip inventory. But by summer, the feeder lid clacked regularly as squirrels took turns opening it.

Maybe squirrels are lazy, I'm thinking. If a varied diet is served up for them, always there when hunger calls, why bother digging in the dirt for bulbs and ruin the manicure?

SOURCE: Dallas Morning News