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European Road Trip Reveals Housing Sectors United by Strife

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Welcome your golden host



Every garden should have a cheerful display of daffodils and now's the time to plant not only daffs but all spring bulbs



Apart from daffodils, Puschkinia, top right, the native bluebell, centre, and snowdrops, right, can be planted now



JANE POWERS GARDENS



Gardening presents a series of mundane tasks: weeding, sowing, hoeing, staking, snipping, pruning, hauling. I love them all and wish I had more time to throw myself into these horticultural labours. For some reason, though, I don't enjoy bulb-planting and have to steel myself to go through the operation every autumn.

Come spring, however, when the little green noses come nudging out of the soil, it is all worth it. So, I urge you to knuckle down now and think of next year. When your garden is dazzling with daffodils and popping with puschkinia (a pretty little pale blue flower), you'll be glad you made the effort.

If your soil is not too heavy, a hand-held bulb-planter, which costs less than a tanner at most garden centres, will make the undertaking easier. This is a spring-loaded gizmo that makes a hole by removing a plug of soil; you place your bulb (pointy end up) into the hole and squeeze the handle to release the soil.

Every garden should have daffodils: they are the quintessential spring bulb, nodding their heads in yellow good humour at a time when we all need cheering up. There are hundreds of varieties readily available – and, while I may just have referred to them as yellow, their colours are getting wilder as breeders move further into the red end of the spectrum.

Daffodils with “pink” cups were once the sole province of narcissus specialists: the first to appear was ‘Mrs R O Backhouse’, named in 1923 by Robert Backhouse for his late wife, Sarah, who had bred it.

There are now rushes of them on sale. Among them are ‘Sentinel’, ‘Salome’ and ‘British Gamble’. Mind you, they're not the pink that five-year-old girls would approve of: they are more washed-out shrimp than Peppa Pig. (Don't believe the pictures in some catalogues.) It's a colour that fights with classic egg-yolk daffs, but it complements blue-flowered bulbs such as bluebells and scillas, if you can get the timing right.

All daffodils, and indeed all bulbs, are more likely to reappear in subsequent years if you let the old foliage die back naturally after they have finished their performance. The leaves send energy back into the bulbs, and fatten them up again. They'll do an even better job if you give them a liquid feed after flowering.

If you don't wish to disfigure your borders with the sight of aged and declining foliage, position larger daffodils at the back and use miniature kinds at the front. Some daffodils put up multiple stems from a single bulb, so the flowering season is dramatically extended.

The dwarf jonquil, ‘Twinkling Yellow’, performed well in the most recent trials carried out by the Royal Horticultural Society: in 2008, 10 bulbs produced a total

of 36 stems, and the flowers lasted 53 days.

Daffodils look all Wordsworthian and flutter when naturalised in grass, but just remember that you won't be able to mow until the leaves have nearly faded. If you need the use of your lawn, don't sprinkle the bulbs evenly across its expanse. Instead, plant them in pools or shoals, and mow around them until at least six weeks after flowering. Choose varieties with strong stems and simple, lightweight flower heads.

Wordsworth's golden host were probably *Narcissus pseudonarcissus*. Other suitable varieties include *N. obvallaris*, and the two forms of the pheasant's-eye daffodil: *N. 'Actaea'* and *N. 'poeticus' var. recurvus*. Complicated, double daffs look unnatural; moreover, instead of dancing in the breeze they will fall over. A good rule is to keep fancy flowers near the house and not in the wilder parts of your garden.

Areas where the grass is sparse, such as under deciduous trees and on banks, are

perfect for naturalising small bulbs. These include snowdrops (especially the common *Galanthus nivalis*), anemones (*A. blanda* and *A. nemorosa*) and the acid-yellow winter aconite (*Eranthis hyemalis*).

For shady areas, there is our beautiful native bluebell (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*) with its deep blue, delicate flowers held on one side of its arched stem.

The related Spanish bluebell (*Hyacinthoides hispanica*) has paler, beefier flowers all round the stem. The distinction is important, as most bulbs labelled simply as bluebells are the latter. It is fine for a town garden (if somewhat invasive), but it shouldn't be planted anywhere near wild colonies of the native species as it will interbreed and mess up the gene pool.

Also for shade – but not bone-dry shade – are the erythroniums, with slim, reflexed petals. The European *E. dens-canis*, or dog's tooth violet, is a dainty, purple-flowered thing, about 12cm tall, while the north American relations, ‘White

Grow for it

Buy bulbs

Garden centre bulbs are generally larger and better quality than those for sale in supermarkets. Mr Middleton Garden Shop, at no 58 Mary Street in Dublin, has thousands of varieties. There's a smaller selection online at mrmiddleton.com. Organic bulbs are available from fruithillfarm.com



Mastering the garden

Join Mr Middleton's autumn Garden Master Class on September 24 and get advice from the queen of Irish gardening, Helen Dillon, pictured, and bulb expert Jacqueline van der Kloet, among others. CityWest Hotel, Saggart, Dublin; €80. Booking is essential. nrmiddleton.com



Jane digs...

reticulatas.com: The website of Canadian iris breeder, Alan McMurtrie. Never mind the awkward page design, feast your eyes on the improbable colours of these dainty irises raised by the retired electrical engineer.

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European road trip reveals housing sectors united by strife

recently undertook a 6,000km road trip that began in Glenties, in Co Donegal, and went as far as Sarajevo in Bosnia and Herzegovina, before returning home via Trieste in Italy. During the trip the housing similarities and challenges that many European countries face became evident.

Germany's housing sector has suffered least from the economic crisis, partly due to the country's well-developed rental sector, which lessened exposure to debt issues. Nearly 40% of German households rent in the private and social housing sectors. Renters have strong security of tenure and there are rent-control mechanisms that have not driven landlords from the market.

In neighbouring Austria, with its relatively weak economy, house prices are growing at 4%-9% per year. About 40% of Austria's most expensive houses are being snapped up by buyers from Ukraine, Russia and other eastern European countries. Such buyers see Austria as a safe

investment, and it is a similar story in London.

To Austria's south, in Slovenia, about 74% of 18- to 34-year-olds still live at home with their parents. About 38% of the country's 844,000 homes are flats, and they are worth an average of €48,700 each. Houses there average €106,000 each. The most expensive housing region, as in many countries, is along Slovenia's short coastline.

LORCAN SIRR ON THE HOME FRONT



In Croatia, a legacy of the Bosnian war in 1992-5 is the potential for landowners who were displaced during the conflict to reclaim their house and land, especially if they can prove that the property was in their family before 1945.

There is no annual property tax in Croatia, no capital gains if the property is held for more than three years (25% if not), and transaction costs are about

10% of the purchase price.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's housing is interesting: Sarajevo, the capital, has a mixture of Austro-Hungarian buildings (with rents of about €900 per month) and Soviet-era apartment complexes (rents of about €200 per month). About 400,000 people live in the city, earning an average net monthly wage of €440, with another 100,000 living in the surrounding hills, from where Serbia conducted its siege of the city.

Much of Sarajevo's war-damaged housing has been repaired with foreign financial assistance, but the shrapnel pockmarks are a regular feature on the facades of buildings.

The city's population is 85% Muslim and many of its mosques are in the middle of residential housing, which makes the 5am call to prayers hard to ignore.

As in Croatia, the Bosnian war has left a complex legal legacy in Sarajevo on housing rights and the right to repossess previously abandoned – but now occupied – property. It has also meant



Germany's housing sector suffered least in the economic downturn

that housing demand reduced significantly because of the decrease in population. As in many countries, social housing giveaways and the increased privatisation of supply has had a negative effect, and illegal construction is also now an issue in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In the six years from 2008,

more than 100,000 construction companies went out of business in Italy. Real estate and the remaining construction companies account for about 40% of Italy's corporate bad debt. More than two-thirds of these debts have personal guarantees or property as collateral, so as house prices fall so does the

worth of these guarantees. For years, many Italians refused to price their house sales realistically and hun on for an economic recovery. Finally realising this is not happening, they are selling, with two-thirds of vendors accepting significant reductions in their asking price.

Italy now has a delayed house price collapse compared with countries such as Spain and Ireland. Like those two countries, it has many empty new homes in difficult-to-sell locations.

There are some similarities across these countries, and Europe in general. The decline of state involvement and an increase in the privatisation of social housing, as well as the growing importance of renting, are common threads.

As I mentioned last week, the free movement of people and capital affects housing demand and supply across the EU. Unlike Ireland, legacies of war, religion and race are still influential factors in housing, and being housed both within and without some parts of the EU.