



FORCING BULBS

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Winters are long and gray in New England. Forcing and growing bulbs indoors gives us a way to have daffodils/paperwhites, tulips, hyacinths and amaryllis blooming even with snow deep on the ground.

“Forcing” is simply a way of making a bulb produce leaves and flowers ahead of its natural outdoor schedule. You speed up the process by manipulating timing and temperature.

BULBS

Many spring-blooming bulbs can be forced into bloom. The easiest choices are daffodils, paperwhites, hyacinths, tulips, grape hyacinths, crocuses and amaryllis. Choose top-size bulbs for the best results. All bulbs to be forced (except amaryllis and paperwhites) need to be stored in a refrigerator or unheated garage/cellar for an initial period of time.

CONTAINERS

Almost any container can be used for forcing bulbs. You may need to put a run-off saucer under the container if it has drainage holes. Special vases have been designed to hold individual hyacinth bulbs and are readily available.

PLANTING

It is simple to plant forcing bulbs into soil but you must follow a schedule. Fill the container 2/3 full of soil and moisten. Place the bulbs (close together but not touching) and gently press them down. Add soil to the top of the container. The tops of tulips and daffodils do not need to be covered. Water the bulbs and place them in a cool, dark place (refrigerator or unheated garage/cellar) to initiate growth. Do not let the pots dry out. Bulbs need to be chilled to 40F for 6-10 weeks in order to imitate dormancy. Flowering will take about 12 weeks for snowdrops, crocus and daffodils and about 16 weeks for tulips. When you see shoots 2-3” above the soil line, bring the bulbs into a cool (50-60F) location. When the foliage and buds are well developed, move the pots to a bright, sunny window.

The easiest way to force daffodils, paperwhites and hyacinths is to take a waterproof bowl and fill it 2/3 full of gravel or small decorative stones, usually white. Insert the base of the bulbs (plant the bulbs close together) into the pebbles so that they sit firmly. Add enough stones to hold the bulbs in place but do not cover them. Pour in water up to the base of the bulbs, replenishing as needed, and store in a cool, dark place until first growth appears. Do not fertilize the bulbs.

PAPERWHITES

Forcing paperwhites is very popular because the bulbs do not require a chilling period and need only 5-6 weeks from planting to bloom. You’ll have Christmas flowers if you start your paperwhites by November 10. Planting at 2-week intervals, you can enjoy blooms from Thanksgiving to Easter! Unplanted bulbs do not spoil in storage as long as you keep them in a cool, dark place.

Paperwhites grow best using the stones and water method. After potting up, keep the container in a cool, dark room for 2-3 weeks until roots begin to develop. Then, move them to a bright, sunny window. When they are flowering, keeping the container out of strong sunlight will prolong the bloom period.

Some people add 1 tsp. of vodka to paperwhites after the bulbs come out of their storage period. This helps keep the stems short and prevents toppling but will not interfere with bloom.

DAFFODILS / HYACINTHS

Daffodils, if not planted but put instead into a bowl with pebbles and water, must still be kept close to 40F for the 6-10 week chilling period.

Special hyacinth vases allow you to grow the bulbs in water. Put the plain bulbs in individual brown paper bags and store them at 50F for 12 weeks. Fill the special vases with water and place the bulb in the vase so that the water just touches the bottom of the bulb. Keep them cool and dark for about 3 weeks and then bring them into the light. You should have blooms in 2 weeks.

AMARYLLIS

Plant the amaryllis bulbs in soil, using a container with a drainage hole and placing a run-off saucer underneath. Leave the neck of the bulb exposed and have the top of the bulb above the rim of the pot. Water well and place the pot in a cool, bright spot. Add a little water as needed. The amaryllis will bloom in 6-8 weeks.

Amaryllis will easily bloom year after year if you follow a few simple directions. After the bulb has bloomed, cut off the flower stem but keep the leaves. Summer the bulb outdoors, watering as needed, but stop watering on Labor Day. Cut off the leaves, repot the bulb and place the pot in the cellar but do not water. Starting around Halloween, bring the bulbs up, at 2 week intervals, watering sparingly until the first sprout appears. Keep moist and move to a bright location until bloom.

AFTER-BLOOM CARE

Forcing is very hard on most bulbs and they will not flower well again. Tulips should just be thrown out. The smaller bulbs --- crocus, scilla, snowdrops --- can be re-planted in the garden but will not bloom well for several years.

Amaryllis will re-bloom successfully, but most daffodils will disappoint.

Enjoy your forced blooms during the winter months as Spring comes early to your house!