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Forcing Bulbs for Indoor Winter Color Successfully

by Joyce Moore

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Greetings fellow Gardeners!

The following tutorial refers to hyacinths and narcissus specifically. Other flower bulbs can also be started indoors but may require further chilling procedures or other special techniques. I chose hyacinths and narcissus due to the ease of forcing these bulbs for the beginning gardener. For these and other bulb chilling requirements, view this [Chilling Timetable for Forcing Bulbs](#).

Looking to have a beautiful fresh flower arrangement for Christmas? Here is an easy and inexpensive table centerpiece idea. Start with a scarlet red poinsettia in the center and offset it with beautiful fragrant white paperwhites. Complete your setting with some evergreen trimmings and a few small pine cones. Add a couple of tall candles for accent and light, and you are done!

PAPERWHITES

Start your paperwhite bulbs right after Thanksgiving in late November up through the first of December (no pre-chilling required) for beautiful Christmas blooms. Pick a beautiful shallow dish or heirloom container to place your bulbs in.

Paperwhites do not absolutely need the dark period mentioned below, but for the best blooms, I would consider the following suggestions:

If planting in a garden pot with soil, then plant with 1/3 of the bulb exposed above the soil level, water thoroughly and set in a cool dark place until you see roots poking through the bottom of pot (about two weeks), then move indoors. Do not water your pots more than once a week while waiting for the roots to appear. Once your plants have been moved indoors, you should have blooming flowers in about two to three weeks! See forcing instructions below for more details.

HYACINTHS



Hyacinths are the most popular bulbs for forcing and with a little pre-planning, you can have these beautiful fragrant blooms in your home throughout the winter or in conjunction with our beautiful narcissus create a stunning indoor blooming garden to get you through the darkest days of winter!

Health Note on Hyacinth Bulbs: People with sensitive skin should wear household gloves when handling the bulbs as the dry scales release tiny, needle-shaped crystals which can irritate the skin.

For Christmas blooms, pot up in soil by October 1st. Start in a 50-55 degree F. room. Move to 65 to 70 degrees F. when leaves are well up and flower stalks showing. As growth indicates, bring in to cool but not an extremely sunny room. Move to brighter lit area as flower tips emerge.

How about beautiful fragrant double hyacinth blooms for Valentine's Day? No problem. Pot up your bulbs in mid

October and bring indoors mid January for blooms four weeks later. See further cultivation instructions below.

You can plant hyacinths either in a standard garden pot (allow four to five inches in depth for adequate root growth) with soil or you can set one in a Victorian Glass Hyacinth bulb Holders for a truly unique display for your home. If planting in a pot, plant your bulb just under the surface of your soil mix, water thoroughly and place in a cool, dark place such as your garage or an unheated closet where the average temperature is around fifty degrees F. Check your plants weekly for growth and water if the soil feels dry. Do not keep the soil wet or the bulb will rot but also don't let the pot completely dry out or you will lose your bulb. Plan on planting your bulbs about eight-ten weeks before you plan on having them in your home. For an extended show of color, plan to plant pots about every two weeks so has to stagger your flower show.

Time of bloom accelerates as normal blooming dates approaches so can plant bulbs as late as late January for March blooms as natural daylight hours lengthen.

When you see emerging flower buds just starting to show some color, it's time to move your plant indoors to a sunny spot but not in direct sunlight. As the plant begins to flower, keep in a cool room with indirect light to extend the bloom time.



In the mid-18th century, Madame de Pompadour -- mistress of France's King Louis XV -- ordered the gardens of Versailles filled with Dutch Hyacinths and had hundreds forced "on glasses" inside the palace in winter. The predominant fashion trend-setter of her age, the royal paramour's passion for these sweetly-scented Dutch bulb flowers sparked a national rage among the French elite.

In England, hyacinths have been placed in sunny windows in cobalt blue and dark green hyacinth glasses for countless winters.

Fill with water and add a little charcoal to keep it sweet. Place a bulb in the glass and keep the water level topped up to just below the base of the bulb but not touching or you encourage the bulb to rot. Treat the same as stated above to allow the roots and bulb to grow. When the flower buds are showing color, the plant is ready to be moved into your home.



NARCISSUS



Narcissus are tender bulbs but are perfect for indoor forcing for winter color and enjoyment. Thus, they can be grown outside only in Climatic Zones 8 to 11. Unless one lives in one of these zones, forced bulbs should be discarded. If you plant the previously forced bulbs outdoors, do not expect them to bloom for at least two years and it takes two seasons for them to get big enough to bloom again. Forcing is very hard on bulbs so normally are discarded after blooming.

Plant November 22-24 for full flowering during Christmas week. Should be well established in semi-darkness, in 55 to 60 degrees F., before being brought to a light room. Let them adjust to light gradually.

Narcissus Planting October 24-27 will bloom for Thanksgiving.

Narcissus Planting December 2-8 brings bloom Christmas week. Paperwhites Grandiflora takes a little longer, so plant by Nov 22-24 for full Christmas blooming.



Traditionally paperwhites and small narcissus are started in a shallow decorative pot in gravel or small decorative rocks. See the next section for further explanation. This info is from De Hertogh, A. A. 1996. Holland Bulb Forcer's Guide, 5th ed. International Flower Bulb Centre, Hillegom, The Netherlands.

Part 2 -- Planting and Watering Instructions for Containers without Drainage Holes
Planting -- Paperwhites can be forced using 3- to 4-inch deep decorative containers that do not have drainage holes. To force the bulbs using this system:

1. Place 1 to 2 inches of washed gravel or stones in the bottom of the container.
2. Carefully, place the bulbs on the gravel or stones.
3. Subsequently, place enough gravel or stones over or around the bulbs to hold them in place. Leave the top 1/3 of the bulb showing.

Watering -- Add just enough water to bring it to base of the bulbs and subsequently, maintain it at this level. Do not immerse the bulbs in water, only the basal (root) plate should be in water.

General Home Forcing Instructions

Temperature -- Initially, use a 60 to 65 degree area in the home. When in flower, use the coolest area of the home.

Light -- Paperwhites will flower under any light conditions. However, for best results, initially place them in a window area with a southern exposure but don't let them cook! When the plants begin to flower, remove them from direct sun-light and place plants in coolest area of the home. This helps to prolong the flowering of the plants.

Fertilization -- None is required for forcing.

Diseases and insects -- If healthy bulbs are purchased, no pests are generally encountered.

I hope you found this beginning guide to flower bulb forcing informative. Due to poor sales, I am no longer offering bulbs but any good garden center should carry a good selection in the fall. Choose firm, full bulbs when browsing the bins and you should have beautiful flowers in just a few weeks! Have fun!

I do not sell flower bulbs but recommend that you visit your local garden center or even the big box home improvement stores for bulbs. Late October and early November is when you find many prepackaged bulbs in containers ready for forcing and blooming for the holidays! How great is that?

Joyce Moore

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