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Forcing Bulbs For Indoor Bloom

Forcing bulbs for winter bloom can take the dreariness out of New England winters. Daffodils, tulips, hyacinths, crocus, and even the so called minor bulbs such as snowdrops, grape hyacinths, and scilla can all be forced into bloom fairly easily.

Narcissus

Paperwhite (and yellow) narcissus and amaryllis are probably the easiest because they do not need to be "cooled". Paperwhite narcissus can be planted in any shallow container that will hold water. First spread a one inch layer of crushed stone then put the bulbs on the stone with the point facing up. Add enough more crushed stone to stabilize the bulb, usually about half way up the bulb. Add just enough water to cover the bottom of the container but be sure the water never touches the bottom of the bulb or it will rot. The roots will find their way down to the water. Put the container in a bright cool spot if possible, 60° F. would be ideal. Expect to see the first blooms in about 3 1/2 weeks and peak bloom in about 4 to 5 weeks. Cooler temperatures mean longer forcing times, higher temperatures mean shorter forcing times.

Amaryllis

Amaryllis are large bulbs with large colorful flowers on tall flower stalks. They are usually potted from October to April. Use a 6 or 7 inch pot, either plastic or clay (however clay gives better drainage) and a good lightweight "soil" mix. When potting, leave the top half of the bulb exposed above the soil level. Amaryllis are native to warm parts of the world and do best in warm temperatures of 70 to 75° F. A bright area out of the direct sun is ideal. Water the plant very little until the flower bud is visible. At this stage the plant can be moved to a cooler and brighter area (but still out of the direct sun), more regular watering is needed now also. A cool night temperature of 50° F. will lengthen the life of the flower once it is in full bloom. In order to keep the bulb in top shape for next year's bloom, treat it as you would any other house plant until danger of frost is past, usually late May. Then plant it outdoors in a lightly shaded spot. In the fall before frost, usually mid September to mid October, dig the bulb and store it in a dry place at about 65° F. After the foliage turns yellow and dies back, cut it off about 2 inches above the top of the bulb. Leave the bulb undisturbed for 1 to 2 months and then repeat the potting and growing instructions above.

"Spring" Bulbs

The rest of the bulbs normally are planted in the ground in the fall and go through the winter outside before blooming in the spring. Therefore, in order to get them to bloom for us in the house, we have to provide a "winter" treatment for them. Select any container that has good drainage holes, and a good lightweight potting "soil". The bulbs should be placed on a layer of soil mix in the pot then covered completely with soil mix. Do not try to skimp by putting only a few bulbs in each container or you will not be happy with the results. The bulbs should almost touch each other when placed in the pot. After potting, water them thoroughly and place in a 65° F. room for 2 weeks to allow rooting to start. Then move the pots to an area with 35 to 45° F. temperatures for 13 to 18 weeks (refrigerators work great). When you are ready force them, put them in an area with moderate temperatures of 50 to 55° F. for 2 to 3 days, then into the area where you will be growing them which should be 50 to 60° F. Bulbs are a cool season plant; if grown at temperatures that are too warm they will get tall and leggy. Forcing time varies greatly with the type of bulb, length of time in cold treatment, and the growing temperatures, but can range from 1 to 4 or more weeks after being taken out of the cold area. A 10° F. increase from 50 to 60° F. decreases the forcing time for crocus from 3 weeks to 1 week. Potting bulbs in many small pots rather than a few large pots allows you to stagger their removal from the cold area to have blooms for long periods of time throughout the winter.

For Layered Bulb Pot, here are the key things to remember:

Cool and Bright. Bulbs like full sun and 50 degrees. So as close to that as you can get in a modern house is great! 60 degrees is better than 70. As bright a spot as you have will work.

Watering. Everybody's home conditions are different, but a rule of thumb would be once a week once they have some good leaves showing. Right now they need less, because they are not using much. A better way is to see how moist or heavy they are by lifting or poking your finger in.

You can plant them outdoors after you have enjoyed them indoors and the flowers have gone by. Generally we want to wait until at least mid April, since these bulbs have been used to indoor temperatures.