

Forcing Bulbs

Most spring flowering bulbs can be forced into bloom indoors. Dormant bulbs, purchased in fall, already contain perfectly formed flower buds within them and will flower in containers indoors as long as a few basic conditions are met.

Purchase the largest size bulbs available for forcing, ones that are in firm and perfect condition. Avoid any that are soft, rotted or wounded.

Any sort of container can be used to force bulbs as long as there is provision made for excess water to drain out. Plastic pots are no better and no worse than clay pots.

Any good, packaged house plant soil can be used as the medium to plant the bulbs in. Or, you can make an excellent mix by combining equal parts of a non-clay garden soil, humus or peat moss, and coarse sand, perlite or pumice.

A four- or five-inch diameter pot will hold one hyacinth, two daffodils, two or three tulips or four to eight crocuses, grape hyacinths, or small daffodil species. Larger or smaller pots will be able to accommodate respectively greater or lesser numbers of bulbs. Pots smaller than four inches are not appropriate for any but the smallest bulbs. A basic rule of thumb is to allow about a half-inch between bulbs.

Put the bulbs in the medium with their necks sticking out just slightly above it. Water thoroughly after potting and place the pots somewhere dark where the temperatures will be between 32°F and 50°F. A dark, unheated attic, basement, garage, or crawl space are good places to put the pots. They can be placed in a cold frame or in a protected area outdoors and covered with sawdust, bark, or sand. Some gardeners recommend digging a trench. Mice, moles, chipmunks and squirrels are potential problems if you keep the bulbs outside because they may eat them. The soil in the pots must be constantly moist, but the bulbs cannot be allowed to get too soggy, or they'll rot. A well-drained situation is a must.

Six to ten weeks are needed for the bulbs to form an adequate root system. For example, bulbs planted on October 1st could be brought out of storage in late November and should bloom in late December or January. Normally it requires about four weeks after they are brought indoors for them to flower.

When the blossoms fade, cut them off and keep the plants in a cool, well-lit place indoors until moderate weather allows them to be planted outdoors in the garden. They will probably not bloom that first spring, but they will during subsequent springs.

The paperwhite narcissus can be forced to bloom indoors without requiring the cold treatment outlined for the hardy, spring bulbs. In fact, no soil is needed for them to flower. All that's needed is a bowl big enough to hold twelve or so bulbs. It should be at least three inches deep, and after filling it half full of pea gravel or sand, the bulbs can be set on top of this surface, allowing about one half-inch of space between them. Fill in with more gravel or sand until one-third to one-half of each bulb is in the medium. Pour water into the bowl until it touches the bottom of the bulbs. Place the bowl somewhere reasonably dark for two weeks to initiate root development. When roots form, the bulbs can be brought into a brightly lit area to flower.

Do not allow the bulbs to dry out during the rooting period, nor should they be kept in too hot an area. Good light is necessary to keep them from getting lanky and falling over. They may need to be staked to prevent this. After flowering, paperwhite narcissi are usually discarded, because they are not reliably hardy in western Washington.