

Forcing Bulbs

How to get spring bulbs to bloom

Psst. Yeah, you. Want in on a little scam that involves fooling Mother Nature? It's a way to get spring bulbs like tulips, daffodils and hyacinths to bloom inside in winter in your living room.

The first thing you're going to need, obviously, is some bulbs. Most varieties of ordinary bulbs that you plant outside in the fall will work. So-called "minor" bulbs (crocus, scilla, snowdrops, etc.) and shorter varieties of tulips and daffodils work best, but feel free to experiment with others. That's part of the fun!

Paperwhite narcissus, amaryllis and freesias also are great for indoor blooming, but they're ready to go and don't need the "secret" care you're about to learn.

The deep, dark secret

The key to "forcing" bulbs into bloom inside is faking them into thinking they've already gone through a whole winter. The way to do that is by potting them up in September through mid-November, chilling them for 12 to 20 weeks, and then bringing the pots into sudden spring in your heated house. Don't scrimp on this chilling period or else you'll get erratic growth and poor or no blooms.

Start by selecting a pot and then lining the bottom with small stones, gravel or broken pot pieces. Clay pots work well because they allow excess water to wick out of the pots, which prevents rotting of the bulbs.

Use a light, moistened potting mix to fill the pot partway so the neck of the bulb will just reach the rim of the pot when set in place. A mix that's 60 percent peat moss, 20 percent vermiculite and 20 percent perlite is ideal.

For especially striking displays, bulbs can be placed so tightly in the pot that they almost touch. Keep in mind that a bulb is a living plant that already has all the food it needs to grow and bloom stored within the bulb. Also keep in mind that the pointy end goes up.

An even more striking technique is to double-layer bulbs. Fill your pot about halfway with potting mix, place a layer of bulbs, then add more mix until the tops are just sticking out. Then place a second layer of bulbs, being careful not to place the upper bulbs directly on top of the lower ones. Then fill to the top with more mix. (Note: Double-layering doesn't work very well with hyacinths.)

Once your bulbs are placed and the pot is filled, water lightly.

Time to chill out

Now comes the critical part. Your job is to supply the potted bulbs with an abbreviated winter.

If you've got a spare refrigerator, that's ideal. Just don't put bulbs in with fruit, which can give off ethylene gas that can rot the bulbs. Or you could use a root cellar, a basement window well, a ventilated crawl space, a cold frame or a trench in the ground. What you're after is temperatures between 40 and 48 degrees and a place where the pots won't freeze or dry out. Water occasionally if the pots are getting dry.

If you're going the outside route, you'll need to insulate your pots. Dig a trench 18 inches deep and line the bottom with a few inches of chopped leaves, compost or mulch. Also line the sides of the trench. (A vegetable or annual-flower bed is ideal since it's already dug and not in use after frost.) Then set in the pots, cover with soil and top it off with a 1- to 2-foot layer of leaves, compost or mulch. That will keep the ground from freezing so you can get your pots when you need them. The mound that results also will help channel water away from the hole and prevent rotting.

You might also consider placing a tall stick next to the pots so you can easily find them in case the ground is buried in snow when you want them. Also label the pots so you know what's in each one.

If you're not using a trench, surround the plants with straw bales or use an insulated cold frame covered with glass or thick plastic.

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Bringing 'em back to life

After the necessary chill time (see the chart for specific times for specific bulbs), take your pots out of the ground, refrigerator or coldframe (as the case may be) and put them in a cool spot in the house in indirect sun for a few days. Once the young shoots (there are young shoots, right?) that should be poking out of the pot get used to a little light, move them into a bright spot at normal home temperatures.

In three to five weeks, you should be seeing gorgeous blooms. To get those pots looking balanced and perfect like they do at the Philadelphia Flower Show, the trick is to turn your pots one-quarter of a turn every day. That keeps any one side of the pot from leaning toward the sun and causes daffodil flowers all to point outward.

During and after care

Keep your forced bulbs watered inside but not to the point of soginess. There's no need to feed them. Once they're in bloom, moving them out of direct sun and into a cool spot will prolong the show.

If you've ignored our advice and planted big, tall varieties of bulbs, keep them from flopping over by making a support. Insert sticks around the perimeter and tie them together with twine to make a little forced-bulb cage.

When your plants are done blooming, don't throw away the bulbs (except for paperwhite narcissus, which are one-time wonders). Plant them outside as soon as the ground thaws. They won't bloom again this year, but they should next year. Tulips can be finicky, but hyacinths, narcissi and crocuses don't seem to mind the forcing episode at all.

Bulb Forcing Timetable

Bulb Type	Weeks to Chill	Weeks till Bloom
Chionodoxa	15	2-3
Crocus	15	2-3
Fritillaria	15	3
Grape hyacinth	13-15	2-3
Hyacinth	12	2-3
Iris reticulata	15	2-3
Narcissus	15-17	2-3
Scilla	12-15	2-3
Snowdrops (Galanthus)	15	2
Tulips	14-20	2-3
Winter aconite (Eranthis)	15	2