

Amaryllis

GENERAL INFORMATION:

Bright, almost audacious colors and enormous flowers make amaryllis plants an exuberant antidote to gloomy winter days. These large bulbs send forth one or two hollow stems that elongate quickly before unfurling three or four lilylike blossoms in vivid tropical shades of red, pink salmon, orange, white, or various bicolors.

Usually we acquire our first amaryllis as a holiday gift, enjoy its blossoms that winter, and then discard the plant, not realizing that amaryllis can live to brighten winter days again. True, the bulb uses up its reserves of energy in putting forth the first round of flowers, but with faithful care through the year, you can coax it to renew its strength so it will bloom again.

LIGHT:

Place in bright spot, warm room (65 to 75 degrees by day, 5 to 10 degrees cooler by night) while the roots are developing. Rotate the pot daily to encourage even growth of the broad, strappy leaves. When buds begin to open, move the plant into a cooler room. Heat and southern exposure light will cause the flowers to fade and wither more quickly. Insufficient sun will cause plants to grow too tall and become weak with lighter colored flowers.

WATER AND SOIL:

An amaryllis blooms best when somewhat pot-bound, so choose a pot that is about 7 inches deep but no more than an inch or two wider than the diameter of the bulb. Clay is preferable to plastic because its weight will provide stability when the plant becomes top-heavy. Be sure the pot has drainage holes; cover the holes with pieces of broken clay pots or fine mesh screen to keep soil from washing out. Fill the pot halfway with commercial potting soil, packing it in fairly firmly. Then set the bulb in place and pack in more potting soil around it, leaving an inch of space between the soil line and the pot's rim. The top third of the bulb should protrude above the soil that water won't accumulate around its neck and cause it to rot. When bulb is packed in, water it well once. Don't water again until the bulb shows active growth. Within a few weeks the bud stalk will appear. Water the plant whenever the top of the soil feels dry.

FERTILIZE:

Feed twice a month with bulb food or a liquid fertilizer (5-10-5 is best).

PROPAGATION:

Occasionally, miniature plants (called "pups") appear around the mother bulb. You can remove them and pot them separately at the beginning of the new-growth stage. Pups develop slowly but should bloom once they are three years old.

COMMENTS:

CARE AFTER BLOOM - After investing all its energy in blooming, your Amaryllis needs plenty of water, fertilizer, and sunshine to allow its leaves to carry on the process of photosynthesis and replenish the bulb's food supply. Pinch off spent blossoms. Don't remove foliage yet. Place in a sunny window and water as needed. Fertilize twice a month. The more leaves it produces in the summer, the more flower stalks it will be able to produce the following winter. If you wish, move it outside once spring has truly arrived. Try to find a spot where it will receive four hours of sun a day.

DORMANCY AND STORAGE - To some extent, each Amaryllis bulb seems to set its own timetable for going dormant and then reblooming. Usually, however, the foliage begins to turn yellow and die back by late August, signaling the beginning of the plant's dormant stage. Now is the time to stop watering and fertilizing the plant. If you had set the pot outside, lay it on its side so that rain won't moisten the soil. Bring it inside before the first frost. Cut off the dead foliage and store the bulb, still in its pot, in a dark, cool (about 55 degrees) spot, such as a basement, for about two months.

REVIVAL - Begin awakening your amaryllis bulb from its rest six to eight weeks before you want it to bloom again. Gently remove the top inch of soil and replace it with fresh potting soil. Then water the plant well and fertilize. Follow the same schedule of care as last year to bring the plant into bloom and through the summer again. An Amaryllis may refuse to bloom again if its roots have been disturbed too often, so don't repot unless the bulb looks really crowded (once every 3 or 4 years is usually enough). You'll disrupt the plant least if you repot it at the start of the revival, or new growth period. Sometimes, despite your best efforts, a revived Amaryllis bulb sends up new leaves but no flowers. Don't despair! If the plant seems healthy and strong, give it another chance by carrying it through another growing season - - it may just need more time to gather the strength to rebloom.