

Colorful Blooms to Brighten Dreary Winter Days

By Susan Camp

A friend recently asked me to write a blog entry on forcing amaryllis (*Hippeastum* cultivars) bulbs indoors. Forcing hardy spring bulbs to bloom out of season is a pleasant way to brighten up the house during the long, dreary days of winter. The Clemson University Cooperative Extension publication HGIC 1556 “Forcing Bulbs Indoors” contains a list of easy and difficult to force bulbs.

There are two basic methods for forcing bulbs: cooling the bulbs before forcing and forcing without cooling. Both amaryllis and paper whites are forced without cooling. Today’s column will focus on the non-cooling method and next week I will review the cooling method. The Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) publication HORT-76NP “Fooling Mother Nature: Forcing Flower Bulbs for Indoor Bloom” provides detailed instructions for both methods.

Purchase the largest, healthiest, most unblemished bulbs you can find. You are going to mess up their normal life cycles by forcing, so they need to be strong with plenty of stored nutrition. Puny, cracked bulbs are not going to perform.

The exotic amaryllis, a native of South America is a favorite for indoor winter forcing. Amaryllis bulbs develop into big, showy red, pink, white, yellow, and salmon blooms. There are striped cultivars, double blooms, and flowers with contrasting edges. Miniature varieties are available. Amaryllis height ranges between 12 to 36 inches, depending on variety.

The huge bulbs (20 to 34 cm. in diameter) can be purchased singly. The amaryllis bulb should fit snugly in the center of its pot, with room for one inch of potting mix around the sides and one to two inches below. The top third of the bulb should be left exposed with the roots spread out into the pot.

Average bloom time is approximately eight weeks. Start the bulb in a cool, dark place (55 to 70 ° F), and then move to a sunny location when shoots appear. Water about once a week. When you see green shoots, you may need to water more often to keep soil moist, but not soggy. Amaryllis flourishes in heat and sunlight. Keep the plant away from heating vents and drafts and move it to a cool spot every evening.

As the plant grows, rotate the pot every few days to keep the stems from leaning to one side. You may need to stake the amaryllis with one of the shorter wire stakes used for irises and gladioli.

After blooming, the amaryllis should be placed outside in a sunny location and fertilized during the growing season. In early fall, cut the leaves back and stop watering for eight weeks. In late fall, repot in fresh potting mix and restart the forcing process for a bright spot of color after next year’s holiday season.

Multi-blossomed paper white narcissus, its yellow cultivar 'Soleil d'Or', and the Chinese sacred lily (*Narcissus tazetta* var. *orientalis*) are good choices for beginners and for children learning about how plants grow. *Narcissus* species contain toxic alkaloids and are harmful to humans and pets, so adult supervision is necessary.

To force paper whites, place two to three inches of pea gravel or decorative pebbles in a dish or bowl. Fill the container with water to just below the surface of the stones. Place the bulbs on top and add enough gravel to cover the bottom quarter of each bulb. Place the paper whites in low light and keep the room temperature at 55 to 60 ° F for two to three weeks.

When roots are well-established and green shoots appear, move the bowl into direct sunlight. Paper whites range from 12 to 18 in height, so they may need support. Successive plantings about two weeks apart will provide beautiful blooms throughout the winter. Discard paper whites after blooming, as they cannot be forced again.

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