



Forcing Bulbs Indoors

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Tulips, hyacinths, daffodils, and crocus offer an array of color that can be used to create a bright "spring" indoors to help counteract winter's bleakness. These hardy bulbs can be forced, which means growing them to produce bloom well out of the plant's normal season of flowering after a period of cold treatment. It is best to use those cultivars (cultivated varieties) recommended for forcing purposes as listed in the catalogues.

The following steps will help in forcing bulbs successfully.

1. Bulbs can be potted anytime from September 1 to December 1. Schedule potting so as to allow 8 to 12 weeks of cold treatment before tulips can be forced, and 8 to 10 weeks of cold treatment before hyacinth, daffodil, and crocus can be forced. For example, pot up tulips around October 1 for blooms in January.

2. Select bulbs that are heavy, solid, and blemish-free. Look for large size, not "bargain bulbs," because these large bulbs force easier and have larger blooms.

3. Bulb pans are the preferred containers. These are clay or plastic pots that are much wider than high. A drainage hole is necessary. For water culture, wide, shallow containers with a depth of at least 2 inches may be used.

4. The mechanical condition of the soil used is important--a light, well-aerated mix is necessary to ensure proper drainage. Mix equal parts (by volume) of potting soil, sphagnum peat moss, and vermiculite or perlite. Fertilizer is not necessary because the bulb itself contains sufficient food to produce good bloom.

5. Fill the pots with soil mix so that when the bulbs are set on the soil the "neck" of the bulb will be about 1 inch below the pot rim (so that three-quarters of the bulb will be covered with soil). Set the bulbs close together, but not touching; plant either five or six tulips, three hyacinth, three daffodil, or six to twelve crocus per 6-inch pot (depending on bulb size). Once the bulbs are set in the pot, add soil until only the bulb tips are visible. Then water the bulbs thoroughly; it may be necessary to add more soil as it settles.

6. Mark each pot with a durable, waterproof tag, indicating the kind of bulb and cultivar, date of planting, and date of removal from cold storage. It's a good idea to protect pots from mice (except for daffodils, which they don't usually bother) by placing wire screen over the top of the pots.

7. Bulbs (except paper white narcissus) must be exposed to a cold treatment (35 to 40 degrees F) for the number of weeks indicated in step#1 while roots are forming. Any cold, dark area can serve as a storage area--a cool cellar, garage, outdoor shed, or cold frame where the pots will not freeze. An old refrigerator could also be used. Additional watering may be necessary for these pots so check them occasionally.

Pots can also be stored in an outdoor trench, dug 12 to 15 inches deep, and wide and long enough to hold the pots. Make sure the trench is well drained; gravel or sand can be put in the bottom to improve drainage. Set pots in the trench and cover with soil to the original ground level. Just before hard freezing, place a 5-inch layer of straw, leaves, or other organic matter over the area and cover this with evergreen boughs or burlap bags. No extra watering should be needed.

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8. One sure sign that pots are ready to bring in to force is that the bulbs' roots will be growing through the drainage hole in the pot, and that a good root mass has formed in the pot (it can be easily knocked out of the pot). At this point, a few pots can be brought in at a time to provide a succession of bloom.

9. Upon bringing a pot of bulbs indoors to force, water well, and expose to cool temperatures (40 to 50 degrees F) and low light for a week. Then gradually move pots to good sunlight and an area where night temperatures are about 60 degrees F (flowers will last longer at lower temperatures). Keep pots well watered.

10. When bloom is over, gradually reduce water, but water enough to keep foliage green. Plant bulbs outside as soon as the soil can be worked to allow foliage to mature. Forced bulbs may not flower the following season because the forcing process takes so much from the bulbs.

(Adapted from Jane Warner, Ohio State University)