

Forcing Bulbs Indoors

by Candace Mullen, Bell County Master Gardener

If you look at the title of this article, you might get an image of someone grabbing up some bulbs from your flowerbed and forcing them to move indoors at rake point! But of course, we aren't going to do that, we're going to tell all of you, green thumb or not, how to have delightful spring flowers inside when the cold winter winds are blowing. All of us need a few bright and cheery spots of color to help us cope with the relatively colorless winter season.

The term "forcing" refers to inducing a plant to produce its shoots, leaves and flowers ahead of the natural schedule and out of the natural environment. You compress and mimic the process of growing that the plant would undergo outdoors in the garden. We would most often choose major spring bulbs for this such as daffodils, tulips, amaryllis, and hyacinths but other plants can be "forced" as well, such as lily of the valley. Minor spring bulbs could include snowdrops, scilla, muscari, chionodoxa, and crocus. Every nursery and floral shop is quite familiar with the process because when you call and order plants out of season, what you get is a "forced" plant.

When selecting bulbs for forcing, be sure you select first-rate, high quality, and top size varieties. Don't try the bargain brand leftovers; you won't have much success with them. Don't buy bulbs that are soft or sprouting. High quality bulbs are necessary because they contain the food required to produce a flowering plant! And of course, that is the reason we force them; we want that touch of color and fragrance in those dreary months! Choose a good catalogue offering a wide variety and look for bulbs identified as good forcing varieties. Ideally, you would want to order them by early October so you can get started by November at the latest, but you can do this when you want if you can find the bulbs. If you start planning now, you can be ready for the next year by buying pots and any other components on sale. What wonderful gifts those pots would make!

Actually any type of pot is acceptable. The plastic pots won't dry out as rapidly, are easier to clean and lighter in weight as well as less expensive. Clay pots, on the other hand, have aesthetic qualities and a wider choice of sizes and shapes. They usually don't need a basket or covering to make them attractive. The clay pots should be soaked for several hours to saturate the pores and any pot should be scrubbed clean if you are reusing it. The pot dilemma becomes one of personal preference.

The soil or planting mixture you need should be equal parts of peat moss, potting soil, sand, and vermiculite or perlite. Bulbs need both moisture and perfect drainage so your planting mixture is very important. You won't need fertilizer as the bulbs have all the stored food necessary to bloom one time. If you do plan to plant them outdoors after forcing, you can add 1 teaspoon of 5-10-5 fertilizer to every quart of potting mixture. If you try hyacinths, crocus, and narcissi in only pebbles and water, with no extra nutrients, discard bulbs after blooming, as they will be completely exhausted.

Mix thoroughly and moisten your medium to a damp consistency, not saturated. Make sure you have placed a few pieces of broken pottery or stones over the drainage holes in the pot, and then add the damp mixture. Fill the pot half full, and then adjust the soil level until the top of the bulbs to be planted reach the rim of the container.

Place the bulbs in your pot with the pointed end up! Plant them as close together as possible without letting them touch. Tulips and other bulbs that have a flat side should be planted with the flat side facing the container rim. This will allow the first leaves to form a border around the edge of the pot. A good rule to follow for closeness is that in a 6-inch pot usually 6 tulips, 3 hyacinths, 6 daffodils, or 15 crocuses will fit. You may also want to mix bulbs instead of choosing only one kind or color for the pot. Allow ¼ inch of space at the top of the pot so it can be watered easily. Fill pot with soil mixture after your bulbs are placed, water thoroughly from the top. Do not allow the soil to become dry after that. Don't forget to label each pot with type, date of planting and date to bring out of cold storage.

Cold storage is the secret and important part to successful "forcing". Bulbs must be given a cold temperature treatment of 35 to 48 degrees F for a minimum of 12-13 weeks. This cold treatment can be provided by either a cold frame, an unheated attic or cellar, under a porch, or even your refrigerator's

vegetable section. I have an old one in the garage that is quite useful for this purpose. In the refrigerator, the pots should be covered with dark, plastic bags that have a few breathing holes punched in them. The medium should be kept moist through this period so you do have to check them. Longer cooling periods will result in taller flowers, while shorter than 13 weeks storage time will result in smaller plants and aborted flowers. A good rule to follow is when you see the shoots 2 to 3 inches above the soil and fine white roots emerging from the drainage holes, it's time to bring the pots out of cold storage.

At this stage of development, move the pots to a cool location, such as an unheated entryway or closed off bedroom, where the temperatures are in the 50's. Place them in indirect lighting and don't let them dry out. Feed weekly with a half-strength solution of houseplant fertilizer and turn every day or so to keep the plants balanced and straight. When the foliage and buds are well developed, move the pots to a bright, sunny window where temperatures are 65 or so. Once the flowers begin to bloom take plants out of direct sunlight to prolong the bloom.

Hyacinths will bloom for nearly 2 wonderful, fragrant weeks if the room is 65 to 68F. After flowering, cut the flower stems and place the pots in direct sunlight, keeping the foliage growing until it begins to die back. As it withers don't pull the leaves off, store bulbs in the pots in a cool, dry place until late summer or early fall, at which time they can be planted in the garden. Don't try to force the same bulbs indoors again. This process weakens the bulb, but they will successfully regenerate and return to a natural cycle of bloom outdoors in the garden bed.

Here are a few varieties that are good for "forcing":

Tulips

Apricot beauty
Bing Crosby
Jingle Bells
White Dream

Crocus

Pickwick
Remembrance
Peter Pan
Purpea Grandiflora

Hyacinths

Amethyst
Blue Jacket
Pink Pearl
Gypsy Queen

Muscari

Blue Spike
Early Giant

Daffodils

Barrett Browning
Ice Follies
Spell Binder
Unsurpassable

Others include snowdrops, Dutch irises, Blue Squill, and Glory-of-the-snow. Happy "forcing" and enjoying the results of your labors!