

Some Bulbs Like to be Cool

By Susan Camp

I don't mind doing things the old-fashioned way, like baking a cake from scratch. In fact, I made a terrific pound cake for Thanksgiving Day dessert from a recipe I found on Facebook. You would think I wouldn't mind using complex gardening techniques, but, the truth is, if there is a long, detailed list of instructions, I probably will abandon the project. This is why I stick to the simple, non-cooling method of forcing amaryllis or paper whites. This week I will try to write sensibly and succinctly about forcing bulbs using the cooling method. This is, for me, is like translating ancient languages without the Rosetta stone.

Ideally, bulbs should be planted in mid-September for blooming during the holidays. Bulbs potted up in mid-October should flower around Valentine's Day and from mid-November to now for flowering in March and April.

Daffodils (*Narcissus* sp.), crocuses (*Crocus* sp.), tulips (*Tulipa* sp.), and hyacinths (*Hyacintha* sp.) all lend themselves to forcing, as do snowdrops (*Galanthus* sp.), grape hyacinths (*Muscari* sp.), and Dutch irises (*I. x hollandica*).

Select the healthiest bulbs or corms you can find. Discard outdoor planting and spacing instructions. If you plan to stagger the flowerings or you can't plant right away, store the bulbs in a labeled mesh bag in a cool, dry place (35 to 55 ° F). The refrigerator vegetable bin will work, although bulbs must not be stored near fruit, which emits ethylene gas that will damage the bulbs. Check the bulbs at intervals for mold.

Plant the bulbs in a non-plastic container that is twice the depth of the bulbs and has a drainage hole. You can make your own potting mix, but commercial potting mix is acceptable and decreases the amount of money you would spend on the ingredients and the amount of time you would spend on mixing. If you are a purist, you will want to blend your own mix.

When you plant the bulbs, don't pack the potting mix too tightly, just enough to hold the bulbs in place and allow for sufficient drainage. Leave room at the top of the container for watering. Small bulbs like crocuses and snowdrops should be covered completely. The tips of larger bulbs can be left uncovered. Plant them close together, but not touching.

The cooling process can take 10 to 15 weeks. During this period, roots and stems develop. Store the potted bulbs in a cool, dry place. An unheated garage or shed will work, but if you have no indoor space, you can store your potted bulbs in a cold frame or dig a shallow trench and line it with drainage material. Cover the pots with mulch and leaves and check them at intervals to make sure that the bulbs don't dry out.

After the cooling period, the pots are placed in indirect sunlight at 60 to 65 ° F until leaves and shoots turn green. Move them to a sunnier, warmer location and rotate the pots every few days.

Keep the potting mix moist. Flower buds should appear in three to four weeks. When the bulbs start to bloom, move them back into indirect sunlight and place in a cool spot at night. After flowering, plant the bulbs in the garden or leave them in the pots to go dormant for forcing in the fall.

The Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) publication HORT-76NP “Fooling Mother Nature: Forcing Flower Bulbs for Indoor Bloom” and the Clemson University Cooperative Extension publication HGIC 1556 “Forcing Bulbs Indoors” provide detailed instructions for both the cooling and non-cooling methods.

It is late in the season to force bulbs this winter, but you should be ready for next September to grow gorgeous flowers all winter long. I will probably stick to paper whites and amaryllis because I will forget to cool the bulbs.

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