

FORCING BULBS FOR INDOOR BLOOM

Barbara J. Bromley, Mercer County Horticulturist 07

Many of the bulbs that are planted outdoors in fall to bloom in spring can be made to flower indoors weeks earlier by potting them in fall and following a simple schedule. This involves placing newly potted bulbs in a cool (35°-50°F) location for 10 to 15 weeks to allow time for root development. They can be "forced" or induced to bloom early by bringing them into a warm room where they can begin to grow well ahead of the spring thaw.

The most popular spring bulbs for indoor flowering are hyacinths, tulips, daffodils and other narcissi, and crocuses. Others, such as Siberian squill, star of Bethlehem, snowdrops, grape hyacinth, and Dutch and reticulata iris are also attractive and force well. Bulb catalogs and good garden centers usually indicate varieties that can be "forced."

The steps involved in bringing bulbs into flower out-of-season are:

- 1 Obtain a good quality planting mix or make your own using equal parts of sifted garden soil, sifted compost, and peat moss. Sand or vermiculite can be added to loosen heavy clay soil, improve root formation and help prevent bulb rot.
- 2 Select a container with drainage holes. Container size will determine the number of bulbs that can be planted. Place bulbs close together for the best display. A six-inch pot or bulb pan will hold about 6 tulips or daffodils, 3 hyacinths, or 15 crocuses or other small bulbs.
- 3 Put a layer of drainage material, such as small pebbles or pieces of broken clay pot, on the bottom of the container. Add a layer of moistened potting soil, then place the bulbs. When properly positioned, larger bulbs should be about 1 inch apart and even with the rim of the pot. Small bulbs should be almost touching in the pot and just barely covered with soil. Water thoroughly.
- 4 Label all pots with variety, planting date, and date to be forced (removed from cold storage.)
- 5 Cool the bulbs for 10 to 15 weeks in an unheated basement, an old refrigerator, a cold frame, or any location where the bulbs will stay cold but not freeze. Check occasionally to be sure the soil stays barely moist, but does not dry out.
- 6 At the end of the cool rooting period, bring the pots into a place where they will receive warmth (about 60°F) and direct sunlight to trigger flower and leaf development. Keep moist, but do not overwater.
- 7 When flowering begins, move the pots from direct sunlight to a site with bright indirect light and cool room temperature (50° to 60°F) to prolong bloom.
- 8 After flowering, these bulbs can't be forced again. When the flowers fade, cut off the flower stalk. Keep the pots in a cool, well-lighted room, water and fertilize until the foliage yellows. Then allow the potting medium to dry thoroughly. These bulbs can be planted outdoors when the weather warms in spring or in the fall.

Forced tulips will split and form about 3 small bulbs within the old bulb wrapper. Hyacinths will often bloom the next year, but the flower stalk will contain few florets. Both tulips and hyacinths that have been forced may be discarded, although it is possible to have them grow in the garden and flower again in a couple of years. Most other bulbs planted in the garden will bloom the next year.