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Forcing Bulbs Indoors

Forcing bulbs allows you to enjoy a ray of Spring before Mother Nature awakens plants outside. The best time to force bulbs is in the Fall when you would normally plant them outdoors. You can use any sized pot, but you will want to fill the pot completely, so remember the larger the pot, the more bulbs you'll need to make it look good.

Plant bulbs with the pointed ends up, as close together as possible, without letting them touch. Tulip and other bulbs with a flat side should be planted with the flat side facing the edge of the container. This will allow the first leaves to form a border around the edge of the pot. Add enough soil mix to fill the pot, and water the bulbs thoroughly from the top - this will settle the soil around the bulbs. Label each pot with the name of the cultivar, date of planting and date to bring out of cold storage.

Daffodils, narcissi, crocus, muscari and other bulbs look great in groups of three, five, or more. Hyacinths look quite handsome when planted singly, or in groups. Dense plantings are recommended for minor bulbs. After planting, place the pots in a cool, dark place, such as a cellar or refrigerator to initiate root and shoot growth. Other suitable environments include under a porch or an unheated garage. Cold storage is a critical step in the forcing process. Ideally, temperatures should be 35° to 40°F, but no higher than 48°F. If necessary, set boxes, pots or black garbage bags over your potted bulbs to keep them dark during the cooling period. The medium should be kept moist through the rooting and cooling period. After five or six weeks, the roots should emerge out of the bottom of the containers of the large hardy bulbs.

Forcing will take about 12 weeks for the early blooming bulbs (snowdrop, crocus, daffodil) and about 16 weeks for the tulips. Longer cold storage will result in taller flowers, while storage time shorter than 13 weeks will result in smaller plants and sometimes aborted flowers. A good rule of thumb: 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 bulbs to a cool location, such as an unheated entryway or closed off back bedroom, where the temperatures are in the '50s. Bulbs should be placed in indirect lighting and should not be allowed to dry out.

After flowering, cut the flower stems and place the pots in direct sunlight, and be sure to fertilize the bulbs until the foliage dies back, so that energy is put back into the bulb for the next year. As it withers, don't pull the leaves off, either plant the bulbs in the early spring or store the bulbs in the pots in a cool, dry place until late summer or early fall, at which time they can be planted into the garden. Attempts to force the same bulbs indoors will be unsuccessful, as forcing weakens the bulb and the bloom will be small and unsatisfactory the following year. Once the bulbs are back in the garden, they will return to a natural schedule, and in several years will again produce a wonderful show of flowers.