

“May the Force be With You” Long Before Spring!
By Bonita Friedland

Imagine white NARCISSUS gracing the Christmas buffet table, HYACINTHS blooming in the kitchen on New Year’s Eve, pink TULIPS popping up in the foyer on Valentine’s Day.

No, you need not have a florist on retainer. In fact, with just a little timing and a minimum of care and cost, you can transform winter’s drab existence into something quite resembling the Chelsea Flower Show! Forcing bulbs for indoor joy is easy and the process is fun to watch. Instructions will vary depending on the bulbs you choose. Let’s start with NARCISSUS:

The easiest bulb to force is the PAPER WHITE NARCISSUS. It’s tender status requires no cooling period, so you simply gather your materials and plant. Begin with firm, unblemished, good-sized bulbs. A take-home instruction card is usually provided, which will indicate the length of time needed for blooming. Count back from the date you’ll want flowers to bloom, and you’ll know when to start. Since my instruction card indicates blooming will occur in 9 weeks, I’m starting my PAPER WHITES around December 12th in hopes of having blooms for Valentine’s Day.

1. Use a shallow, watertight bowl or container—approximately 4 inches deep.
2. Fill it with pebbles to about one-half inch below the top.
3. Gently twist the bulb—pointed end up—into the pebbles, leaving three fourths of the bulb exposed.
4. Plant your bulbs close together, but not quite touching. (A 7 inch container might hold approximately 6 PAPER WHITES.) Water to cover the base of the bulbs, and keep it replenished.

It’s fascinating to see the stems and leaves pop out of the bulb. Even if you miss your target date, the emerging shoots will still look attractive. A warm, sunny location will hasten blooming. To hold back a bloom, place the container in a cooler, not-so-sunny area. If stems get too long, and threaten to tip over, tie the plant at mid-section with a few strands of raffia.

Hardy bulbs, like TULIP and HYACINTH, require an extra step before you begin. Since they need a cold period to encourage root development, you must provide a “mock winter.” Some bulb producers suggest that you simply paper-bag the bulbs and refrigerate for 8 weeks before indoor planting. I have used this method with HYACINTH. HYACINTH will grow well in water alone. You can use a special forcing vase, or a small carafe with a wide top. I have a wonderful Italian jardinière, with six holes at the top. I fill it with water and place the pre-chilled bulbs over the holes. In a matter of days, I can lift the bulbs to see the developing roots! The HYACINTH fragrance begins long before the flower fully matures. Prepare for the intensity!

Choose early-flowering varieties of TULIPS for forcing. A planting mixture of equal parts of potting soil, sand, and moist peat moss is essential. Choose a container with drainage holes, tall enough to allow 2 inches below the bulb for root development, and enough space above to cover three fourths of the bulb.

1. Start with an inch of small pebbles at the bottom of the pot. Follow with 2 inches of soil medium.
2. Place the bulbs, pointed side up, into the pot. If you place the flat side of the bulb toward the outside of the container, the lowest leaves will drape over the edge nicely.
3. Cover with soil, leaving one-fourth of the bulb exposed. Water thoroughly.
4. Place the pot into a paper bag and then refrigerate—or place it in an unheated garage—for approx. 12 weeks, checking regularly to maintain moisture. When shoots emerge, the plant is usually ready.
5. Lift and check the bulbs for a good root system. Transfer the plant to a cool, dark spot in the house for one week, then place it in a bright, sunny location to insure vibrant colored blooms.

Unfortunately, forced bulbs are so exhausted after blooming that they most likely refuse to bloom again! But before they head to that compost heap, they will have given you, your family and friends, quite a delightful show!