

Forcing Holiday Bulbs

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Are you looking for an inexpensive and interesting Holiday gift related to gardening? Consider forced bulbs. Among the choices are amaryllis, paperwhites, and hyacinth.

Area nurseries have large amaryllis bulbs in versions of red, pink, and bicolors (with white). "Large" is a key adjective when describing amaryllis bulbs. They are usually at least baseball size. In general, the larger the bulb the larger the flowers and the more capable the bulb is to perform over several years. Some of the bulbs are imported from Israel and other exotic locales. Some promise as many as six blooms in 6 to 8 weeks after stem growth begins.

For long term performance the amaryllis does best when placed in a small container with a well-drained potting mix or sand that is fertilized with a soluble fertilizer in water every month. The soil should be kept moist but not soggy. Start the plant in the shade and if a sunny spot is available after the stem emerges, the stems can more easily replenish the stored nutrients in the bulb.

As another option amaryllis bulbs can be placed in a decorative container filled with water, stones, soil or even marbles and they will send up a sturdy shoot which will produce one or more large blooms.

At some of the retailers there are bulb forcing kits available that could be included as part of the amaryllis bulb as a gift. This might be an ideal gift for a family with children to deliver to a grandmother or other elderly relative at a nursing home. The children, instead of being bored by the visit, could put together the amaryllis forcing kit. The recipient of the gift will be fascinated by the growth and blooming of the amaryllis and have the memory of the assembly of the planting kit by the family visit.

Paperwhites planted in a container on top of 2 inches of marbles or pebbles will bloom indoors in 3 to 5 weeks. Forced paperwhites are always remembered for their attractive white blooms and fragrance. They are especially showy in a tall clear vase where the bulbs are placed in a solid formation on a dark bed of pebbles. The fragrance can be described as sweet and distinctive or slightly unpleasant depending on your tastes.

My favorite thing about paperwhites is that the bulbs can be planted outside after the forced blooms decline and they will naturalize to sprout and bloom every winter. When I write or make a presentation about "12 Months of Color", paperwhites are always the first plant on my list. Plant the bulbs in full sun or light shade in the shrub border or a corner of the lawn and the lush paperwhite foliage will appear in early January or even December and the blooms will follow shortly in January. Outside the bloom smell is diluted to the point of being pleasant but is still potent enough to make the naturalized paperwhites be deer-proof.

Hyacinth are very beautiful and make attractive forced flowers for the holidays. The favorite colors are some version of blue, but variations of white and pink are also available. The major difference in forcing hyacinth is that they must be pre-chilled. Place them in a paper sack in the refrigerator crisper for 5 or more weeks before they are planted. If you want a long life that includes several years of bloom, the

hyacinth should be planted in a well-drained potting soil. Fertilize with soluble fertilizer when the bulbs are planted. The container with the bulbs goes into a dark closet until the leaves emerge and then it is placed in a sunny location. After the flowers wilt, trim them off. Later cut off the leaves at soil surface level after they yellow and brown. The leaves, when green must be allowed access to the sun if you want them to bloom well again the next year. Store the post-bloom hyacinth planting in a dark location until you are ready to place it in the refrigerator for its 5-week chill period just before the next year's bloom period.

If you are content with just one year's bloom, the hyacinth bulbs (after the 5 weeks of chill) can be placed on marbles, water or pebbles just like the amaryllis or paperwhites.