

You don't have to wait for spring to enjoy colorful tulips and daffodils or sweet-scented hyacinths and paper-white narcissus. By using a technique called forcing, you can enjoy these spring bloomers in the dead of winter--indoors. Forcing speeds up the normal blooming time of bulb plants--from six or seven months to three or four months. Follow the general directions for most bulbs.

Buy bulbs that are recommended for forcing in the fall from a nursery or greenhouse. Choose bulbs that are large, firm, and free of bruises and blemishes. Generally, the larger the bulb you use, the better the results.

Use a pot that is at least twice as tall as the bulbs you're using--that way you're sure there'll be room for the roots to develop properly. It doesn't matter what the pot is made of--plastic, terra-cotta, ceramic--as long as it has a drainage hole. Wash the pot, and place a shard over the hole to prevent the soil from washing out.

Use a porous potting soil--equal parts of vermiculite, peat moss, and packaged potting soil work well. Don't reuse soil that has already been used to force bulbs. Fertilizing is unnecessary because the bulb has all the nutrients the plant needs for its first season.

Fill the pot halfway with soil mixture, but don't pack it down. Then place the bulbs on top, and filter more soil to cover the bulbs. Let the bulb tips peek out. Fill the pot with as many bulbs as possible for the best effect, but leave at least a pencil's width between each bulb.

Plant tulip bulbs with the flat side of the bulb to the outside. Label each pot with the date and variety of bulb you've planted. You may want to list color, too.

The next step is to create an artificial winter by placing the bulbs in cold storage for several months. A refrigerator, window well, or an unheated basement or garage are all good places. Temperatures should be from 35 to 50 degrees Fahrenheit but should never drop below freezing. Cover the pots with newspapers or a box so no light reaches them. Water every two or three weeks or whenever soil dries out.

Check the pots for root development in eight weeks. If roots are visible through the drainage hole and stems are about two inches high, the bulbs are ready for a simulated spring. Some should be moved into a cool room with no bright light for a few weeks; others are ready for good light immediately. In a few weeks, buds will appear, followed shortly by blooms. To prolong the life of your plants, keep them out of direct sun and away from hot or cold drafts. Put them in a cool room at night. Water regularly.

To get your bulbs to bloom in January, you should pot them in early October. For February, pot in October or November; for March bloom, pot in mid-November.

As the blooms fade, move the crocus, daffodil, or hyacinth pots to a cool window and continue to water. When the garden thaws, plant the bulbs in the ground.

