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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Forced to Force Spring Bulbs

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When the bulb catalogs started showing up in early August, I visualized bright spots of early spring color, ordered lots of bulbs and prepped the beds, removing rocks and weeds, adding organic matter and a light layer of well-rotted manure on top. (I should have buried chicken wire around the beds to keep out rodents.)

The bulbs arrived late- the 22nd of October, just in time to get them planted before the ground froze solid if I was quick about it. Ideally, they would settle in and begin rooting before winter for a good spring start.

With so many bulbs to plant, it took every spare moment I had. I hadn't worked up quite enough ground or planted the bulbs tightly enough to fit them all in. I had a dozen bulbs left over. While I worked on other urgent fall chores, the ground froze. Hmm, what to do- get out a pick ax, or use the bulbs for forcing? I chose forcing. Sound harsh? Really, forcing is the gentle process of pampering winter hardy, spring blooming bulbs into blooming early indoors, and it isn't as tricky as it sounds.

Step 1: Choose containers and medium.

Use a porous potting mix with perlite or coarse sand. For hyacinths you can use pebbles and water. Choose a container such as a vase with a narrow neck so the bulb sits in the neck above the pebbles so it won't get waterlogged. This is a good choice for a few individual bulbs in separate containers. In my situation, with more bulbs, I'm using a wider container and some cactus potting mix that I happen to have.

Step 2: Pre-chill.

This step can be done simply, by tucking the bulbs into your refrigerator crisper drawer until the right time to take them out, depending on the type of bulb. (Be sure to label! You don't want to accidentally substitute crocuses for shallots in your soup.) Don't store fruit with your bulbs as the ethylene gas released from ripening fruit can trigger bulbs to sprout prematurely.

But the preferred method is to pot the bulbs before prechilling. This gives them a chance to root before sprouting, making them stronger. Place the bulbs peeking above the potting mix with several inches of mix below the bulbs for the roots to grow into. Tightly spaced bulbs make a dramatic display. Press the soil down well. Water well, place into a plastic bag with a few breathing holes, and place in a cool location, around 40-45 F. Mine are in an insulated cooler buried deeply in straw outside.

Step 3: Get ready for blooms!

If you already potted up the bulbs, just set them in a cool semi-dark spot at about 50-60 F. for a few days then move to a bright windowsill and start watering regularly. Or, if you didn't already, pot them in your chosen containers at this time. It will take a few weeks longer with this method before the growth will produce blooms.

Different bulbs have different chilling times and different blooming times.

Tulips need 15 weeks of pre-chilling, daffodils, hyacinths and crocus need about 14, and smaller bulbs need 12 weeks, but will not be hurt by longer chill times. Smaller blooms will begin blooming in about 2-3 weeks, larger bulbs will take 3-5 weeks. Forced bulbs may not rebloom the next year, but given a few years to rebuild their resources, they may eventually bloom again if planted outdoors after they are through blooming indoors. Have an early spring!

For more information, see: hortnews.extension.iastate.edu/2011/9-14/forcingbulbs.html

cru.cahe.wsu.edu/CEPublications/pnw164

extension.umn.edu/planting-and-growing-guides/growing-bulbs-indoors



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