

Hyacinths and Paperwhites: Easy to Force Without Soil

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Brighten winter rooms with fragrant blooms

When I was growing up in England, around Christmas time, my mother would bring down from the attic a shallow bowl of forced hyacinth bulbs, and they would fill the cottage with their fragrance. For me, to this day, the fragrance of hyacinths brightens the cold and dark of winter.

My favorite way to force hyacinths is to use special glass vases where you can see both the roots below the water and the stems and flowers above. Forced hyacinth bulbs are usually discarded after blooming. This means you don't have to worry about saving the bulb, and if you'd rather stick four toothpicks into the bulb to support it over a regular jam or mason jar instead of buying a fancy hyacinth glass, that would work just fine, too.

When choosing your hyacinth bulbs, choose large, firm ones, but not so large they will not fit into your chosen containers. Wear gloves when handling the bulbs because they are covered with minuscule barbs that can irritate your skin.

Chill but don't freeze

The trick to forcing hyacinth bulbs is to chill them for a sufficient amount of time. If the bulbs are not chilled for long enough, the stems will be short and the blooms will be disappointing. In all it will take 16 weeks from starting to chill your bulbs to bloom time.

So, start now for blooms in early March—not quite in time to welcome in the new year but still in time to banish end-of-winter blues. (You can also check with your local supplier to see if they have bulbs that have already been chilling for a while, which will cut down on the time you need to chill them.)

Fill your chosen containers with water so that the water is close to—but not touching—the bottom of the bulbs. The water needs to be close so the roots don't dry out, but damp bulbs will rot. It's a bit of a tricky procedure—a few drops of water can go a long way in a hyacinth vase—but worth the effort to avoid getting moldy or poorly rooting bulbs.

Put your vases in a cool, dark, well-ventilated place, such as a garage, at about 45 degrees Fahrenheit for 13 weeks. If you choose a space outside, make sure it will not freeze. Temperatures below 35 degrees stop root growth, and frozen water will break your vases. A refrigerator is an option, but fridges can be a bit on the humid side. If you do choose the fridge, make sure there are no ripening fruit in there as ripening fruits such as apples give off ethylene,

which harms the bloom. Temperatures above 55 degrees Fahrenheit encourage top growth too early and should be avoided.



Glass bulb vases reveal the growth of hyacinth roots along with strong, upright leaves and aromatic blooms.
Photo by Jane Billingham.

Check the vases weekly and top up the water if necessary. Slowly, slowly, roots will begin to grow and yellow shoots will appear. When the shoots are two to three inches tall, move the vases to a warmer spot that receives low to medium light (a temperature between 50 and 60 degrees Fahrenheit is good.) Leave them here until the shoots turn green—four to five days. Then move the hyacinths to a brightly lit location at about 60 to 65 degrees Fahrenheit (but avoid direct sunlight.)

The hyacinths should flower about three weeks after removal from cold storage. Bloom will last longer if they can be kept cool at night. Forced hyacinths will bloom for about two weeks, and you can space the time you bring them indoors to prolong the time their heady scent fills the room.

Too much waiting? Try paperwhites instead

If you don't have the patience for hyacinths, there are always the equally fragrant paperwhites, which do not need to be—and, indeed, should not be—chilled, and will bloom for you in just four to six weeks.

Like hyacinths, paperwhites can be grown in water only. The only difference is that as paperwhites grow much taller than hyacinths, they need gravel to anchor the bulbs. Select firm, shiny bulbs. Fill your chosen containers two-thirds full with gravel. Settle in the bulb until about half the bulb is covered. Then fill the container with water just to the bottom of the bulbs.

Set your pots in a warm, light place and they will begin to grow immediately. Keep them watered and, if you can, set them in a cool place (40s to 50s) overnight to stop the shoots from elongating and threatening to tip the pot over. Paperwhites can bloom for three weeks if they get cool nights. Plant them now for festive, fragrant blooms to accompany your preparations for the festive season.

Resources:

- “Paperwhite Narcissus for the Holidays” by Mary Robson.
<http://gardening.wsu.edu/column/12-03-00.htm>
- “Home Forcing of Hyacinths” by Gwendolyn H. Pemberton and A.A. De Hertogh.
<http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/hil-8507.html> (this includes a chart with the optimal cold weeks for different hyacinth cultivars)
- “Forcing Flower Bulbs” by Richard Jauron. Iowa State University Extension. PM 1319. Revised March 2001.