



Forcing Bulbs

by Carol Barany

I don't have to tell you that the months of January and February in Yakima can seem endless. Why not brighten those dark days by forcing bulbs to flower early indoors? A pot of tulips on the window sill in February can renew a winter-worn gardener's spirit.

I know your garden "To-Do" list is already as long as your arm, but this project takes some timely preparation. On days when spring is still months away, you'll be glad you made the time. The children in your life will love helping you, so include them if you can.

There are two types of bulbs for indoor growing: those that need chilling and those that don't. Amaryllis and paperwhites, both natives of warm climates, do not need a cooling period to trigger blooms. You can easily grow these bulbs in a pot filled with moist soil. Or skip the soil and plant in a shallow bowl filled with a few inches of pebbles to anchor the bulb's basal plate, and keep the vessel filled with water to cover no more than the bottom third of the bulb. Either way, these bulbs will bloom just 4 weeks after planting. Keep the stems short and sturdy by starting the bulbs out with indirect light and temperatures close to 50 degrees for the first two weeks, and then bring them into warmer, brighter conditions.

All other spring bulbs, such as daffodils, tulips, hyacinths, crocus, Dutch iris, and grape hyacinth require a chilling period before they bloom.

Begin by potting the bulbs in clean pots filled with good potting soil. Make sure there is a hole for drainage. Do not bury the bulbs, but allow their 'noses' to be exposed. No worries about fertilizing now. The bulbs have enough stored food to flower one time.

Plant the bulbs shoulder-to-shoulder. Usually 6 tulip bulbs, 3 hyacinths, 6 daffodils, or 15 crocus, will fit into a 6-inch pot. For a prettier arrangement, the flat side of the tulip bulb should be placed next to the rim of the pot since the largest leaf will always grow on that

side. Allow some space at the top of the pot so it can be watered easily. Give the bulbs a drink immediately upon planting, and anytime the soil seems overly dry.

Bulbs must be given a cold temperature treatment of 35– 48 degrees F for a minimum of 12–13 weeks. This cold treatment can be provided in a cold frame, an unheated basement or garage, or even your refrigerator, as long as you're not storing fresh fruit there. The ethylene gas released by ripening fruit can interfere with flower development. In the refrigerator, cover the pots with plastic bags that have ventilation holes. Keep the bulbs in the dark, or they may start growing before they're fully chilled.

Mark your calendar to remind yourself when the first pots can be removed from storage for forcing to begin. The required chilling period is a range. Start checking the pots at the short end of the range. When the shoots are 2-3" high, move the pots into a cool, sunny location in the house where temperatures are 50-60 degrees. Avoid direct sunlight.

Note that after rooting, you don't have to bring the bulbs out of the cold immediately. Most will tolerate extra chilling time, allowing you to create a succession of winter bloom.

Hyacinths, crocus, and daffodils can also be forced in water in special clear, hourglass-shaped vases. The bulb is placed in the upper portion, water in the bottom. The vase is then kept in a cool, dark room (preferably under 50 degrees F) for four to eight weeks until the root system has developed and the top elongates. Then place the container in a bright window and wait for blossoms.

After blooming, most gardeners compost the spent bulbs. If you can't bring yourself to do that, keep watering the pots and add some fertilizer. When the foliage yellows, you can remove the bulbs and plant them in the garden. It may take several years for the bulbs to build up the reserves to bloom again. Paperwhites will not rebloom in our climate.

Chilling and Blooming Times

- **Daffodils:** 12-15 weeks of chilling; 2-3 weeks to bloom after chilling
- **Tulips:** 10-16 weeks of chilling; 2-3 weeks to bloom after chilling
- **Crocus:** 8-15 weeks of chilling; 2-3 weeks to bloom after chilling
- **Grape hyacinth:** 8-15 weeks of chilling; 2-3 weeks to bloom after chilling
- **Dutch iris:** 13-15 weeks of chilling; 2-3 weeks to bloom after chilling
- **Hyacinth:** 12-15 weeks of chilling; 2-3 weeks to bloom after chilling