

Forcing Bulbs To Bloom Indoors Or Outdoors

BY KATHY VAN MULLEKOM

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Pots of pretty spring-flowering bulbs can be part of your home's indoor and outdoor decor, with or without a yard.

It's all about the planting method you choose this fall.

For the holidays and wintertime cheer, you can force potted bulbs into early bloom, and use them for decorations or give them as cheery gifts.

Or, you can plant bulbs in large containers with ample drainage holes, place them outdoors where they won't freeze and wait for the color show to happen early 2012.

"When plants are in containers, the color can be moved around where it's needed," says Becky Heath of Brent and Becky's Bulbs, a mail-order bulb warehouse in southeastern Virginia.

"Sometimes, they can be put in the garden, other times on the deck or on either side of the front door. They can even be used as table decorations.

"When they stop blooming, the bulbs can be planted in empty spots in your garden.

"If you don't have a garden, you can recycle them by giving them to a school, church, library or a friend."



A planter with Katie Heath daffodils, pink tulips and white hyacinths gives a feeling of spring.

potting soil; cover necks of bulbs with 1 inch of soil or gravel. Potting soil should be a coarse growing mix, which is available at your local garden center.

- Water pots and allow them to drain.
- Place in a cool area — about 50-60 degrees Fahrenheit for one to two weeks until fully rooted. Then, reduce temperature to 35-45 degrees for 12-16 weeks. There are a variety of ways and means to achieve this cool period, including:

- In a refrigerator, an old-fashioned one is best, however if frost-free, place pot in it in the hydrator. Take out any ripening vegetables or fruit, because they will produce ethylene gas, which may cause bulbs to abort their blooms — or better still, use the "beer fridge" in the garage.

- In a foam cooler in an unheated garage. The cooler keeps the bulbs at a relatively constant cool temperature — or in a garbage bag or box surrounded with foam peanuts

- Buried outside under a high pile of leaves/mulch — at least 6-10 inches deep — preferably on the north side of a building in the shade.

- Check on the inside pots every other week. If soil appears very dry, you may want to water lightly. When sprouts begin forming on top, they should be about ready to be brought into the forcing environment.

- If you are forcing bulbs for fun, just put the pots in a sunny location where you can enjoy them while they bloom. This should take anywhere from two to four weeks. Water only as needed, making sure not to drown them.

- For those who need blooms on a specific date, there is a little more work to do. To control the rate of growth, you must take into account:

- Light. During fall, winter and early spring, there is less light than what the bulbs want. You should supply additional cool light in the form of fluorescent or 'grow lights' very close, within 1 foot, of the merging foliage. This prevents the plant from getting too tall and eliminate the need for staking.

- Bottom heat. Bulbs grow faster if bottom heat is applied. Ideally, potted bulbs should be placed on heating mats, available from greenhouse suppliers. If not available, a food warmer, refrigerator top or freezer top can be used, just as long as some heat is produced. A cool environment 50-60 degrees F. is the ideal room temperature.

- If foliage and blooms appear to be maturing too quickly, take them away from the bottom heat, and place them in a cooler environment but keep the light plentiful.

- When they have finished blooming, continue to water as a houseplant. When spring arrives and there is no longer danger of hard freeze — (below 25 degrees F. — they can be planted outside, bulbs, roots and all, in the garden.

Or, if you bought bulbs already pre-cooled dry (without the pot and soil), pot them just as soon as you receive them because the pre-cooling effect lessens each day they are out of the cooler. Once potted, water well and let drain. Then, put them in a dark 50-60 degree F. area for a couple of weeks to encourage the roots to develop. Once rooted, you may bring them out to a sunny location, following the suggestions above.

PLANTING BULBS IN CONTAINERS

To showcase bulbs in containers, follow some

simple steps, courtesy International Flower Bulb Centre:

- Use potting mix, not garden soil, in a container with lots of good bottom drainage holes to prevent waterlogged soil that easily rots roots.

- Choose containers deep enough for the bulbs you want to use; catalogs and package labeling tell you what planting depth is recommended for each bulb type.

- Fill the pot one-quarter to one-third deep with soil, position bulbs at the proper depth. Fill in additional soil to 1 inch below the pot top; the extra space at the top provides room for mulch, if needed, and allows you to water the container.

- In fall, you can plant more layers in one container to have a spring garden in one pot — a technique called "lasagna gardening." Choose bulbs that flower one after another to get 100 days of blooms in one pot, or choose two types of bulbs to flower at the same time. Once you choose the bulbs you want to use, plant the largest bulbs on the bottom, graduating to smaller bulbs as you plant closer to the surface.

- You can display the planted container as is, or sink it into another more decorative outer pot. To promote good drainage, elevate the inner pot by placing it on a brick or inverted plant saucer positioned inside the outer pot.



Containers of spring-flowering bulbs welcome the warmer weather after winter.

FORCING BULBS INTO BLOOM

Most spring-flowering bulbs can be forced by following a few small steps, according to Heath.

"Just remember that horticulture is not an 'exact science,' and that temperature, humidity, light and even refrigerators can sometimes be different, giving different results," she says.

"Fortunately, plants can be forgiving of imperfect humans — just relax, experiment and enjoy."

- Using pots with drainage holes in the bottom, place the bulbs in a pot three-fourths filled with



A patriotic look can be created in a planter with red tulips, white hyacinths and blue muscari.

ONLINE

• Learn more about bulbs through the nonprofit International Flower Bulb Centre at bulb.com; visit Brent and Becky's Bulbs at brentandbeckysbulbs.com or call 877-661-2852 for a free print catalog.



A Proven Winners mini container garden features fall colors in flowers and foliage, along with wispy grass.

DIGGIN' IN:

Proven Winners Offers More Than Just Plants

BY KATHY VAN MULLEKOM

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You know the brand name Proven Winners if you favor annuals such as Supertunia and Diamond Frost euphorbia.

The breeder/grower also offers perennials like Marie Louise Jensen clematis and shrubs like Blue Chip butterfly bush.

They are plants commonly found at garden centers nationwide.

Now, the company sponsors a gardening magazine, free and available online, with ideas and inspiration for all the plants it produces.

"Annuals aren't just for spring and summer," according to an article in the fall issue of Proven Beauty.

"In fact, many annuals are sure-fire bets for an abundance of fall flowers because they actually re-initiate blooms when the nights become cooler."

The nice thing about annuals is that they are well suited for containers, which makes seasonal gardening simple. Plop flowering posies into pretty decorative pots and you have an instant garden on your porch or patio. You see examples of grasses, flowers and foliage combined in containers in the online magazine.

The publication, which you can download, shares tips on how to dry grasses and flowers from your garden, how to make a Chinese lantern wreath and how to use dried hydrangea blooms in your home's decor.

There are gardening tips, such as: Divide spring-flowering perennials in fall, fall-blooming



From a distance, a large urn of Proven Winners plants with varying colors and textures brings the look of living art to any yard.

perennials in spring and summer-blooming perennials in spring or fall.

In the autumn edition, you also get a sneak peek at Proven Winners 2012 perennials, Going Bananas daylily, Wheee! Hosta, Banana Cream Shasta daisy and Maestro sedum.

And, you see how some Color-Choice past winners like Little Lime hydrangea, Little Henry sweetspire and Lil Miss Sunshine Bluebeard can still give you great fall color.

Subscribe to the quarterly magazine at www.ProvenWinners.com, where you will also find "recipes" for four seasons of container plantings.

Temps. Say Get Plants Ready For Indoors

BY NORMAN WINTER

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This morning, there was a change in the air — you know what I am talking about. It was cloudy with a cool crisp breeze out of the north. No doubt many of you have already felt a more substantial change. This signals an ideal time to think about getting houseplants ready for a season ahead indoors.

First, check to see if your plants need to be repotted. Water the plant well so that the soil sticks together. Knock the plant gently out of the pot and inspect the root system. If you have a really tight root ball, you may need to step up to the next size container.

If you need to repot the plants then select a good light-weight sterile soil mix available at any garden center or nursery. I prefer light mixes that have good water holding capacity yet are sure to drain. The No. 1 cause of death of houseplants is over-watering, and many of the bargain potting soils can become heavy and hold too much water. Lighter soils may be a little more expensive, but they provide superior aeration, and water and nutrient holding capacity.

If the container you presently have is as large as you want to handle this is certainly no issue. Trim both the roots and plant. Lift the plant and prune the roots by one-third, then prune one-third off the top to match the root loss. I kept an Improved Meyer lemon for about 15 years by repeating this process.

If the plants have been outside, inspect them closely to be sure they are not harboring insect pests. You will be quite embarrassed when you invite guests over for dinner and roaches or ants come crawling out to partake of the roasted pheasant.

Remove any diseased or dead foliage and pinch back growth to make a tidy appearance. If your plants have been outside on the porch or patio, they probably have received a tremendous amount of light compared to your indoor environment. Outside they may be receiving thousands of footcandles of light and indoors reduced to a few hundred.

Bring plants indoors gradually. Move them from the current location outside to a shadier spot for a few days to allow some time to acclimate to lower light conditions. Despite the fact that we struggle with low light, watching you watering regimen will be just as crucial. We are so used to pouring on the water daily when they were outside that we forget to check the moisture level indoors.

Since the plants aren't growing as vigorously, if at all, they don't need nearly as much water. Check the soil to see if it is actually dry before watering. You never want the indoor plant to set in soggy soil. When you do water, irrigate enough that it drains through the soil and out the hole. Then by all means, let the soil dry before you water again. There is no set calendar for indoor watering, only when the plant needs it.

Since the plant is not actively growing and we cut back on water, it stands to reason we shouldn't fertilize nearly as often. Use a dilute fertilizer mixed with the water about every fifth watering. There is nothing that will make you enjoy your home more than healthy tropical plants indoors, so get them ready now for winter.

Norman Winter is executive director of The National Butterfly Center in Mission, Texas, and author of "Tough-as-Nails Flowers for the South" and "Captivating Combinations: Color and Style in the Garden." Contact him at: winter@naba.org



A change in temperature says it's time to get our favorite potted plants ready for a long winter indoors.

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