

FORCING BULBS FOR INDOOR BLOOM

It is possible to have a whole season of flowering daffodils indoors before spring. Tulips, hyacinths, dwarf daffodils, and the little (minor) bulbs such as snowdrops, scillas, muscari, chionodoxa, and crocus force equally well. Both the major and minor bulbs are handled in much the same way, although the forcing period may vary slightly. Some cultivars (early cultivars and those that do not grow too tall) are better suited for forcing than others. Catalogs usually identify forcing varieties.

Plastic pots have the advantage of not drying out as rapidly as clay pots. They are easier to clean and lighter in weight as well as less expensive. However, many prefer clay bulb pans or pots. Bulbs grow equally well in either. Six- to eight-inch pots are recommended for daffodils. The pots should be scrubbed clean before use, and clay pots soaked for several hours to fill pores. A good potting mixture consists of one part good garden soil, one part sand, and one part peat moss. Fertilizer should not be added to the mixture. A suitable potting mixture may be bought from a florist if only a few bulbs are to be potted.

Planting can take place any time from mid-September to December, depending on the desired date of flowering, and the type of storage used. As a general rule, for late flowering, plant late; and for early flowering, plant early. Remember, the minimum length of the total cold treatment should be 13 weeks; 15 weeks are preferred. Place broken crockery over drainage holes and cover with a little sphagnum moss, pebbles, or other coarse material before adding potting soil. Half fill the pot with soil, place the bulbs, then fill the pot with soil. Settle the soil well around the bulbs by jarring the pot sharply and lightly pressing soil with fingers. Do not pack hard. Do not press the bulbs into the soil. The soil under the bulbs should be loose so that good rooting can take place quickly. Bulbs should be set with their tips well above the soil line which should be an inch below the rim of the pot. Label each pot with the name of the cultivar, date of planting, and date to be placed in the house.

After planting, water the pots thoroughly and place them in a refrigerator at 35–45°F. The medium should be kept moist through the rooting and cooling period. After five to six weeks, the roots should emerge out of the bottom of the containers. The shoots will subsequently emerge from the bulbs.

After a minimum of 13 weeks of cold, the first bulbs may be placed in the house. Longer cold storage will result in taller flowers, while storage time shorter than 13 weeks will result in smaller plants and sometimes aborted flowers.

In the house, place the plants in an area with a temperature of approximately 60°. For best results, place them in direct sunlight. The plants will require about 3–4 weeks to flower. Once the flowers begin to open, take the plants out of direct sunlight. The flowers will last longer. Since the bulb contains most of the plant food it needs, it is not necessary to fertilize. Bulbs which have been forced indoors are usually of little value for outdoor planting. Daffodils, however, can be placed outdoors as soon as spring arrives. Many of them will flower in one to two years.

If you do not have a spare refrigerator, or do not wish to put pots of bulbs in your refrigerator, there are several other methods you may use. Remember, root growth does not occur when the temperature is below freezing.

- Method 1. Plunge soaked pots into soil or peat moss in coldframe and keep damp. Never leave pots uncovered in areas of severe cold as they will freeze from the bottom and break.
- Method 2. Dig trench in ground 12–15 inches deep. Level off bottom of trench. Place well-soaked pots in trench and cover to ground level with soil, compost, peat, or a combination of such material. A 2-inch layer of sand on top of the pots will make removal easier, and a layer of leaves, straw, or other mulch over the top to a depth of several inches will keep the ground from freezing if pots have to be lifted in freezing weather. Mark location of trench with tall stake in case of snow. An alternate method is to place a crate or box filled with six inches of peat on the bottom of the trench. Place pots of bulbs on peat and fill with dry, crisp leaves. (Pit should be dug to below freezing level.)
- Method 3. Use shallow window well which is accessible from the basement. Place storm sash or other protection outside over window well when frost arrives. Water every 2 or 3 weeks. In especially cold weather, leave cellar window ajar to prevent freezing of pots and to permit continuation of root growth.
- Method 4. Store in a cool spot in cellar, garage, porch, or greenhouse. Water as needed. Dampened pots wrapped in polyethylene should need no watering. When sprouts are about 4 inches high and flower buds well out of neck of bulbs, bring into warmer place. Increase heat gradually from 50° to a maximum of 60°F. Reduce watering just before buds open; and when flowers are in full bloom, apply very little water.

Catch a January thaw to bring pots inside under Methods 1–3. Bring into a cool room and treat as above.