

Henry Homeyer: How to force bulbs to bloom for a brighter winter

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Henry Homeyer

At the end of a week of gray, raw, and drizzly days, I was at my wits' end. Even my intrepid corgi, Daphne, was less than fully excited about taking walks in the rain. So I did what works best for me: I planted bulbs indoors so that I can force them to bloom in late winter. And it worked. Planting bulbs always picks up my spirits.

Almost any spring bulb can be kept in a pot indoors for 8 to 16 weeks (depending on the bulb type) and made to bloom. Choose early-blooming daffodils and they can be ready in 12 weeks. Tulips? About 16 weeks. "Triumph" tulips are said to be the best for forcing. Crocus and other small, early bulbs can be ready in 8 to 10 weeks.

Your bulbs planted for forcing need a cold place to develop: 35 to 50 degrees F. is right. A cold basement, garage or barn are possibilities. Even a spare fridge would be all right. But if the temperature goes below freezing for very long, the roots will stop growing — and growing roots is a big part of what has to happen if you are to get good blossoms.

All a bulb needs is a growing medium and a little moisture. I reuse the potting mix that I used for growing annual plants outdoors in summer. I just pull up the summer's plants, fluff up the soil, add a little as

needed, and make sure it is damp to start. If it is dry, I water it well before I plant my bulbs.

It is good to check the moisture levels in your bulb containers once a month during the time the bulbs are dormant and the roots are growing. Depending on the temperature, humidity and soil type, the soil medium can dry out. If it gets too dry, your flowers might not bloom. But too much water is also not good: it can rot the bulbs. That is more likely to happen if you used ordinary garden soil, which I don't recommend, as it holds water.

Instead of soil, use potting mix, or make a potting mix using peat moss, perlite or vermiculite, and compost. The mix should be fluffy and light. Dry peat moss, as it comes out of the package, is very dry and takes time to moisten thoroughly. Get your potting mix nicely moistened before planting any bulbs.

So how close can you plant your bulbs? Basically as close as you want. I put 20 tulips in my window box which is roughly 36 inches long and 7 inches wide. In a round pot with an 11-inch opening, I put 10 daffodils. An inch or two between bulbs is fine.

I like to lay out my bulbs on top of the potting mix to see how close I should plant them. I don't want to compress the soil, so I use a soup spoon or my fingers to make a hole for the bulb and pop it into place. Outdoors we plant tulips and daffodils 6 inches deep, but in a pot? There is often little space for soil over the tops of the bulbs. I leave an inch of free space above the soil line so I can water without spilling.

Clay pots may look good to you, but they allow moisture to evaporate from the sides of the pot. Plastic, fiberglass or porcelain containers are better for bulbs because they hold the moisture of the potting mix, minimizing water loss.

Be sure to label each pot with the date planted, and what is planted. Later, that will tell you when you can bring it into the warmth. Often bulbs will send roots out through the holes in the bottom of the pot or send up green shoots telling you they are ready. But don't rush the

process. Tulips brought up early will have nice green leaves, but no flowers.

Most bulbs that have been forced are not likely to flower the following year, even if you keep the foliage alive until spring and plant them outside. I've done it, and some daffodils will build up the energy to blossom after a while.

You also need to remember that although daffodils are mildly poisonous and hence unattractive to rodents, most other bulbs signify "LUNCH" for mice and squirrels. Most of us living in the country have at least a few mice in the basement at this time of year. They are looking for a cozy place to spend the cold months, after all. Red squirrels are notorious when it comes to sneaking into old houses and causing mischief. So you must prevent rodents from getting to your bulbs stored inside.

Each year I bring in my big cedar window box and fill it up with bulbs for forcing. This year I decided to plant tulips in it, so I made a lid for it out of a scrap of plywood. I even screwed down the top to prevent industrious squirrels from lifting it up to get at the tulips. ("You hold it up, Larry," I can imagine one saying, "I'll get those tulips and toss them out.") I made other lids for ceramic pots and placed a brick on each one.

When it's time to bring your bulbs into the warmth of the house, put them on a sunny window to develop blossoms, but keep them out of direct sun when the flowers open so they will last longer. Get some bulbs and pot them up soon. It will help you feel better now — and in mud season!

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