

Daffodils for Out-of-Season Bloom

November, 2002

Have you ever wished you had a pot of daffodils in bloom to brighten the days in the middle of winter? You can, and easier than you think.

The easiest way, of course, is to buy some bulbs of paperwhite types. Most garden stores have white ones, but you can also get a yellow and orange cultivar called 'Grand Soleil d'Or'. And there's a yellow and white one, 'Chinese Sacred Lily', which is also sometimes available by mail order. All you need to grow them to blooming size is a shallow bowl and some washed pebbles. Be sure the pebbles are washed, especially if you've collected them. A friend once used pebbles she'd collected on an ocean beach, and the salt which clung to the pebbles caused a failure with the bulbs! Put the pebbles in the bowl, put the bulbs on top, and add water just to the base of the bulbs. Roots will quickly grow, and be followed shortly with leaves and bloom stalks. Be sure to keep the water level to the base of the bulbs. Once the foliage begins to grow, be sure to keep the bowl in lots of light. Often the foliage gets too long, and begins to flop over. You might consider getting a hurricane lamp chimney from a craft store to place over the bulbs when you first pot them. The clear glass will keep the foliage in place, and you'll still be able to see the growth and flowers. Once the bulbs have finished blooming, discard them, unless you live in an area which gets no frost. Even then, if you plant them out, it will take several years for them to bloom again.

Forcing normal bulbs to bloom inside in winter takes a little more effort. The size of the pot depends on the number of bulbs you want to plant. I'd go for a deeper pot, rather than a shallow "bulb pan," so that you can plant a double layer of bulbs for a fuller pot. And try to choose fat rounds, rather than double- or triple-nosed bulbs. All the rounds should have a bud, while the offsets of the double- or triple-nosed ones may not. And it doesn't matter whether you use clay or plastic pots. Both have their devotees. Plastic is lighter, they don't dry out as quickly, and they may be cheaper. Whichever type you choose, you can always put the pot in a decorative container when the bulbs are in flower.

Bulbs can be planted anytime from mid-September to December, depending on when you want them to bloom. The bulbs need a minimum of 13 weeks of cold treatment; 15 weeks is better. Any potting soil will work, but you want to make sure it drains well. I buy whatever's on sale, then add granite grit to ensure the soil drains well. Put some broken crockery over the drainage holes in the pot, then half-fill the pot with the soil mix. Place the bulbs on the soil. There's no need to allow a lot of room between the bulbs, as they'll only be in the pot for one growing season. Put some soil on top of the bulbs, then put another layer of bulbs on top of the first ones. Don't press the bulbs into the soil. Cover the bulbs so that the tips of the top layer of bulbs are just above the soil line. Tap the pots slightly to settle the soil. Water the pots thoroughly and let them drain. Label

the pots with the cultivar name, the date of planting, and the date to bring them out of cold storage. Put the well-drained pots into plastic bags, and put them in the refrigerator for a minimum of 13 weeks. Check occasionally to make sure there is still enough moisture in the pots.

Now, if you're doing lots of pots and don't have a spare refrigerator, or don't want to put the bulbs in your refrigerator, you can sink the pots in a coldframe, or you can prepare a "plunge bed" for the pots. Dig a trench about 12 inches deep, place the well-soaked pots into the trench and cover to ground level with soil, compost, peat or a combination of such material. Add a layer of leaves, straw or other mulch to keep the ground from freezing. Mark the location of the trench with tall stakes in case of snow. Remember, the bulbs will not make root growth if the ground is frozen.

If a "plunge bed" is not for you, how about a window well? In some homes the basement windows are partially or fully below ground, with a semi-circular well to keep soil away and allow light. If you have access to these through the basement, you can put the pots there; cover the well some way for protection against the coldest weather.

And the easiest way would be to store the pots in a cool spot in the basement, garage, enclosed porch, or greenhouse. If the pots are wrapped in plastic, they shouldn't need much watering. I keep a few pots in the garage, unwrapped, and when I shovel snow from the driveway, I throw some on my pots.

After the 13-15 weeks of cold, you can bring the pots into the house, in a cool room with a temperature of about 60 degrees. For best results, place them in direct sunlight. They should flower in about 3-4 weeks. Once they begin to flower, take them out of the direct sunlight. Rotate the pots daily so that the foliage and flowers don't lean to one side.

Some cultivars are better for forcing than others. Check Dr. DeHertogh's article on home forcing at <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/hil/hil-8531.htm...> The Clemson University site at <http://virtual.clemson.edu/groups/hort/s...> is geared more to professionals interested in marketing pots of bulbs.

So with just a little bit of work, you can have daffodil blooms ahead of spring.