

HOME-GARDEN

Gardening: Elegant paperwhites lend themselves to holiday decor and can be easily grown this time of year

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Whether you consider them the end of the old gardening season or the start of the next one, paperwhites bring much-needed beauty and fragrance to the darkest days of the year.

Close relatives of the hardy daffodils that bloom outdoors in spring, paperwhite narcissus usually are available as bulbs that you plant in containers indoors and that burst into bloom mere weeks later.

With their long, elegant leaves and enchanting white blossoms, paperwhites grace interiors and thrill flower lovers at a time when little else is blooming. If you start now, they could be ready to enjoy by Christmas.

Thankfully, growing paperwhites is an easy project, even for children or beginning gardeners.

Sometimes they are sold in a kit with all the supplies you need. Or, if you purchase loose bulbs in bulk, simply round up a container and some potting medium.

While planting in peat moss or potting soil is perfectly acceptable, the bulbs don't require that. Instead, you could use marbles or pebbles, which weight the bottom of a container and help keep the top-heavy plants from falling over when they mature.

Almost any type of container works: a flowerpot, a bowl, or a decorative glass or ceramic vessel. Because it supports the leaves and flower stems, a tall, clear glass vase makes an excellent choice — and it can showcase colored pieces of glass or polished river rocks.

If you use peat moss or potting medium, keep it moist but not soggy; with rocks or marbles, add water so that it's close to but not touching the bottom of the bulbs.

Regardless of planting method, keep the container in a cool room (50 to 60 degrees) away from direct sun for several weeks. When roots start to emerge, move the container to a warmer, sunny location. (You often can see roots through a clear container. With an opaque container, gently tug the top of a bulb — if you feel resistance, the roots are growing.)

In a sunnier spot, growth will take off, leading to buds and then flowers, which usually last about a week or two.

Even with lots of sun, paperwhites tend to become floppy and even fall over. One solution is to corral them with ring supports or rustic-looking bare twigs, perhaps snipped from a shrub in your yard.

Believe it or not, another approach — unconventional but effective — entails adding alcohol to the water. In the right proportions, it limits the height of paperwhites but doesn't hurt the flowers, researchers at Cornell University have found. Hard liquor such as whiskey or vodka works, and so does rubbing alcohol, aka isopropyl alcohol, but don't use beer or wine, which contains too many sugars.

For details on timing and alcohol amounts, read the report titled "Pickling Your Paperwhites" (http://www.hort.cornell.edu/miller/bulb/Pickling_your_Paperwhites.pdf).

After the flowers fade, the whole plant can go into the compost pile. Because coaxing paperwhites to rebloom in our climate is all but impossible, it's best to enjoy them for their fleeting beauty and simply start another batch.

Diana Lockwood, a freelance writer covering gardening topics, posts on Facebook at www.facebook.com/mrsgardenperson.

At a glance

Paperwhites are sometimes available at local brick-and-mortar outlets, such as plant nurseries or home-improvement stores.

You also can find them at online retailers, such as <https://www.brentandbeckysbulbs.com>, <https://www.longfield-gardens.com/> and <http://www.whiteflowerfarm.com/>.