

Ask a Master Gardener Article  
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### **Forcing Flower Bulbs to Bloom**

Q. I have seen beautiful flowers blooming in pots in homes during the holiday season. How can I get spring flowers to bloom inside my home in the fall and winter months?

A. Flower bulbs can be forced to bloom at times different than when they would naturally bloom. Forcing is usually done with amaryllis, daffodils, paperwhites, hyacinths, crocus, and other spring bulbs. By forcing bulbs you can bring springtime color into your home during the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays and well beyond.

The two bulbs with the best chance for successful forcing are amaryllis and paperwhites. Amaryllis may take up to 12 weeks to bloom; paper-whites may take only three to four. Neither of these bulbs requires pre-chilling to bloom. Tulips, hyacinths, tulips and crocus bulbs must go through a minimum of 12 weeks of chilling in order to bloom. For this reason and because of time constraints, choose only bulbs that have been pre-chilled or choose bulbs that do not require pre-chilling if you want to have flowers in late November to December.

Here are the steps to follow if you are interested in trying to force bulbs. First, use bulbs that are good forcers. Second, use good quality bulbs. Paper-white bulbs give fragrant blooms and can be ready for Thanksgiving if you begin now, as they take only a few weeks to reach bloom. Bulbs may be potted in a good quality potting mix. Fill a six-inch pot to about two-thirds full of the soil. Place bulbs with the flat (root) side down and pointed (stem) side up. If you look closely at a paperwhite bulb you will see that it has one side larger than the other. Arrange the bulbs with the smaller side of the bulb toward the outside of the pot. The largest leaves come from this side of the bulb and this placement will give your pot a prettier appearance. Place the bulbs close to one another and fill in around them to cover about two-thirds of the bulb. Do not pack the medium, but loosely fill in. You may be able to place five to seven paper-white bulbs in one pot. Water the soil until moist but not soaking. Keep the water below the top of the bulb. If water gets into the top of the bulb, the bulb will rot. Let the soil get dry to the touch between waterings. Keep the pot in a cool (65 degrees), bright spot until the leaves are about four inches tall. At this point you may place the pot in a warmer location.

You can have forced bulbs by Christmas. Choose an Amaryllis for this, as it takes longer to come to bloom. As soon as an amaryllis bulb begins to sprout, it is ready for potting. You may have noticed some amaryllis bulbs in boxes that have sprouted and are forcing themselves out of the box. You may want to save the bulb's life and put it into a pot. As for soil, follow the same directions for planting as described above for the paperwhite. Amaryllis bulbs are usually large, as bulbs go, so you may be able to place only one bulb in a six-inch pot. Also, the flower stalks are heavier and require a heavy pot to keep the plant from tipping over. Amaryllis may have one to two stalks with three to four blooms per stalk. They have 16 to 24 inch tall stems so staking may be required to keep them from falling over. Space three stakes (dowels) around the outer

edge of the soil inside the pot, and as the stems grow tall, use raffia or ribbon to tie around the stakes to hold up the stems. Flowers will last longer if you water less during bloom time. Do not fertilize forced plants as their food is already inside the bulb.

You will have spring flowers this fall and winter by forcing bulbs to bloom. For more information on bulbs or answers to any other gardening questions, contact a Master Gardener Extension Volunteer at 770-836-8546, via e-mail at [ccmg@uga.edu](mailto:ccmg@uga.edu) or visit our office in the Ag Center at 900 Newnan Road in Carrollton.