

Forcing bulbs

FORCING BULBS IS REALLY VERY EASY. All you need are bulbs, soil, containers and a place to store the planted containers so that they are exposed to constant below freezing temperatures and yet can be retrieved without having to use a pick axe to dig them up!

Let's start with the bulbs. You can force most bulbs – tulips, crocuses, etc. – in about 12 weeks. Daffodils take a bit longer requiring 14 to 16 weeks or so to ensure proper flower development. Any good potting soil or compost will do just fine as these will provide adequate drainage, an essential to indoor and outdoor bulb health. Almost any container will do provided it is large enough, is at least four inches deep and has plenty of drainage holes.

First fill the pot 2/3 full with soil. Then place the bulbs on the surface (blunt end down) and press them gently into the soil. You can put as many as you want into the pot so long as none of them touches another bulb or the sides of the container. Fill the rest of the pot with soil leaving enough room to “hold” water without spilling soil over the sides. Water the pot and let it drain.

Here is the hardest part: Put the pots in a picnic cooler or a sturdy box and fill completely with dry soil, sand or vermiculite. Put the lid on and then place this in an unheated garage, tool shed or cold frame. The idea is to both not let freeze-thaw cycles affect the container once it freezes – and to be able to retrieve the cooler! In 12 weeks (14 for daffodils) bring the container inside, let it thaw, then remove the pots and put them in a cool but lighted location. Stand back and watch them grow and bloom. If you want really spectacular displays, try putting a second layer of bulbs “in between” the first layer and right on top of it. The tips of these later bulbs will stick up above the soil level, but don't worry.

A tip on tulips is to make sure the tips all point in one direction, not up. Arrange yours so the tips all point towards the edges of the pot. If all of this sounds like too much fuss and work, consider two other things. First, you can purchase narcissus bulbs that have already been cold-treated so that they will bloom indoors without having to freeze them off. These can be potted up as above or even started on a bed of pebbles covered with water. Or you can force hyacinths in pots or in special hyacinth water vases. These are usually sold wherever hyacinth bulbs are sold. Hyacinths are really easy and only take about six weeks.