

Year Round Care for Your Amaryllis

Poinsettias, Christmas cactus, and amaryllis are the “Big Three” plants of the winter holidays. Unfortunately, almost all poinsettias are tossed out shortly after the holiday decorations are put away for another year. And you may be left scratching your head wondering why your Christmas cactus doesn’t bloom on schedule. But an amaryllis grown from pre-potted kits is a snap—don’t discard it when it is through blooming. With a little care and planning, you can have beautiful amaryllis blooms all winter—and they will come back to entertain you year after year!

They are easy to care for, they grow unbelievably fast and even those whose vision is failing can enjoy the large eight to ten inch vibrant blooms. The youngest gardeners in the family will also love having their own amaryllis kits. Small children want instant gratification (don’t we all!), and growing an amaryllis is about as close to instant gratification as it gets.

Pre-potted amaryllis kits are available in garden centres and discount stores by late fall. They can also be ordered online and from bulb specialty catalogs. Kits have everything needed to ensure beautiful blooms in just six to eight weeks. All that is needed to start them on their way to stunning blooms is an initial watering and then a sunny location when the first hint of green growth appears.

Once the flowering stems begin to grow (the long, strappy leaves come later), place the pot by a bright sunny window—a southern exposure is best, but northern or western-facing windows will do. Go easy on the watering—just once a week will be plenty.

The 24-inch flowering stems shoot up amazingly fast. Your plant may become top-heavy in its lightweight plastic pot by the time the plant blooms. You can solve this problem by placing the plastic pot inside a heavier ceramic pot. The addition of a thin dowel will eliminate the tendency of the stem to flop. But be careful to place the dowel near the edge of the pot to avoid damaging the humungous bulb.

When the first bud is about to burst into bloom, move the plant to a cooler location out of direct sunlight. Then each flower will bloom longer and not become sun-faded. Continue your weekly waterings.

Snip off each flower as it wilts—each stem will bear two to five flowers—the larger the bulb the more flowers your plant will produce. Bulbs the size of a grapefruit will often produce two or more flowering stems. However, if you have chosen a miniature amaryllis the flowers will be smaller, but blooms will be more prolific.

When your plant is through blooming, cut the stems off two inches above the bulb, then return your plant to a sunny window location. Now begin adding a liquid houseplant fertilizer, half strength, to every other watering. In early June you can sink the pot into a sunny location in the garden. A little light shade during the heat of the day will be beneficial. Continue fertilizing throughout the summer.

Early in September the leaves usually begin to turn yellow. This is normal. Lift the pot and bring it indoors before first frost. Discontinue watering and cut off the leaves when they have all yellowed. Select a dark, cool place to store your bulb during dormancy. (You may need to repot your amaryllis bulbs every three or four years.)

November starts the yearly cycle again. Give the initial watering and set the bulb a sunny window when new growth first appears. Then sometime during the 2003 holidays the first welcome bloom will appear.

By starting an additional amaryllis bulb every two weeks, beginning in November and continuing into January, you can enjoy these tropical beauties until spring brings us its kaleidoscope of crocus, daffodils, and tulips.