

# MESSENGER-INQUIRER



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**Bring Spring Indoors by Forcing Spring Flowering Bulbs**  
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Spring flowering bulbs bring beauty to the landscape. Why not enjoy them inside the home? By growing them in pots and forcing them to bloom, there are many options for placement of these flowers in the landscape and indoors.

Spring flowering bulbs commonly forced are hyacinths, tulips, *Narcissus* (daffodils), grape hyacinth, and crocus. Garden center displays and catalogs often indicate cultivars and types of bulbs suitable for forcing.

The growth cycle of the bulb is manipulated to force it to bloom. Most spring flowering bulbs have the same cycle. In late summer, most are dormant with little, if any, active root growth and no shoot growth. As the soil temperature cools in the fall, root growth and flower development initiates. When the temperature begins to rise in the spring, shoot growth starts with flowering to follow. After flowering, the leaves continue to replenish the food stored in the bulb through photosynthesis. Offsets are produced. As the foliage starts to die, the bulb becomes dormant and ready to begin the cycle again.

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To start forcing bulbs, choose a clay or plastic flowerpot with drainage holes. Specially designed vases for forcing individual hyacinth bulbs are available allowing you to see the development of roots, but are not required.

Plant bulbs in commercial, "soilless" potting mix. The mix should hold some moisture but allow water to drain. Place a layer of gravel over the drainage hole of the pot to allow water to drain. Fill three-fourths of the container with potting mix. Place several bulbs close together in the container to fill the pot. Add soil around the bulbs until the soil is one-half inch below the pot rim. The tops of tulip bulbs do not need to be covered. Then water the bulbs.

Daffodils (*Narcissus*) and crocus make a good combination in a pot to extend the blooming period. Crocus will bloom first, and then the daffodils.

All of the spring-blooming bulbs, except 'Paperwhite' Narcissus, must have a cold period, around 45 degrees F, for at least three months to develop a strong root system to support plant growth and flower development. Temperatures near freezing stop root growth.

Temperatures above 55 degrees F may cause the top growth to begin prematurely.

The cold period can be supplied in different ways. Potted bulbs can be stored in a refrigerator devoted to bulbs, if one is available, for three to four months. Avoid storing apples with the pots of bulbs because the apples produce ethylene gas which stops the growth and development of the bulbs. Pots in a refrigerator dry out rapidly, so check them periodically to ensure adequate moisture.

Another method is to place potted bulbs in a cold frame. Spread straw over and around the pots to keep them from freezing. Open the cold frame on sunny winter days because the temperature inside the cold frame can rapidly increase, which may initiate premature flowering.

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A cold period can be supplied by placing pots in a trench or pit in the soil that is as deep as the pots and fill in soil around them. Cover pots with dried leaves or straw. The bulbs will receive the cold temperatures needed but will not freeze.

The cold period length depends on the specific bulb. Crocus, tulips, and *Narcissus*, except for 'Paperwhite' *Narcissus*, need 15-17 weeks of cold. Hyacinth needs 11 to 14 weeks of cold, and grape hyacinth needs 14 to 15 weeks. If some of these bulbs are planted in pots now and chilled, they may begin to bloom in February to March.

After the bulbs have been chilled long enough, check the root system. Roots should be starting to come out of the drainage hole. If roots have not developed, place the bulbs under 45 degrees F temperature for one to two more weeks. Then bring them indoors. Depending on the temperature inside the house, the plants will bloom in approximately two to three weeks.

Indoors, water the pots thoroughly and place them in a cool, sunny area. After the leaves begin to emerge from the bulb, move the pots to a warmer location in indirect sunlight. Forcing bulbs slowly is better than placing them directly in a bright, warm location. The quick transition from chilling to warm temperatures can sometimes "blast" the buds, which means everything moves too fast and the bulbs do not bloom.

If wanting to place them on the patio or deck, it is easiest to bury the pot in a trench outside. As the leaves of the bulbs begin to grow along with those planted in the ground, lift the pots and place them in the wanted location.

After the bulbs finish blooming, keep the foliage actively growing. Fertilize the bulbs with a water soluble fertilizer according to label directions. After the foliage dies back naturally,

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plant bulbs directly in the garden or store them for planting outside in the fall. These bulbs should not be kept for forcing again because they may not produce a good show the second time.

For more information about forcing spring flowering bulbs, contact the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service at 270-685-8480 or [annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu](mailto:annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu).

## **Annette's Tip :**

Daviess County citizens can dispose of unwanted household hazardous waste at the Daviess County Operations Center at 2620 KY 81 on Saturday, September 27 from 8:00 a.m. to noon. Check <https://www.daviessky.org/household-hazardous-waste-collection-set-for-september-27/> for a list of accepted waste.

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