

Forcing Bulbs

“The crocus reminds us that no matter how harsh the winter, spring always returns.”

- Unknown

Winter officially arrived at our home the week of the deer-hunting season. As I’m not a hunter myself, I spent my time working on some “indoor” gardening projects. One of those projects was harvesting my Brussels sprouts. It took a bit to get them pulled; but afterwards, we trimmed, blanched, and froze 14-quart bags of deliciousness for eating later this winter. My other indoor project was repotting my amaryllis bulbs for some winter blooming. I had several that were “resting” in the basement. I had let the plants go dormant, so they were ready to be repotted for another blooming. I repot my amaryllis when I have time, so I don’t always have them blooming for the holidays. However, I greatly appreciate the blooms in January and February when the snow is deep.

Forcing bulbs indoors is a favorite indoor gardening project for many people. There are numerous bulbs you can force if you give them the right conditions to break dormancy, make roots, and bloom. Daffodils, hyacinths, and crocus are common ones to force. They need a chilling period before they will bloom, just like they do in nature. Two others to consider, paperwhites and amaryllis, don’t require a chilling period. Your local stores may still have spring-blooming bulbs available that are ideal for forcing. You will need to chill them once you get them home anywhere from 2 to 4 months depending on the bulb. You can also purchase pre-chilled bulbs.

There are three techniques you can use to force them: (1) in gravel, (2) in water, and (3) in soil. Keep in mind, if you force them in water or gravel, they will use up their resources and typically will not rebloom. Once the bulbs have been forced this way have bloomed, you can toss the spent bulbs in the compost pile. I decided to ignore that advice last year and hung onto three hyacinth bulbs that I forced in water. All three have started regrowing and one is starting to rebloom. I don’t know yet how well it will bloom or if the other two will at all as I didn’t chill them before they started to regrow. I’ll keep you posted. Those you force in soil can be saved after they bloom and planted outdoors for future blooming after another year.

For the water or gravel method, the bulbs are not submerged in water; instead, they are suspended above the water level. Place them on a bed of gravel and fill with water until it just about touches the bottom of the bulb. For the water method, a bulb vase is ideal. It has a narrow neck to help keep the bulb above the water level. The roots will reach for the water. Move the bulbs to a cool, dark location for 4 to 6 weeks, monitor the water level, and watch for sprouting. Then move them back into a brightly lit location between 60- and 70-degrees F. Add water as needed and wait for them to bloom.

For the soil method, simply plant the bulbs in a pot. Bulb tops should be even or just slightly below the container’s rim. Allow the bulb tops to stick above the potting soil. After potting, water and place them in the refrigerator, root cellar, any other cold storage location you have. Water them regularly and keep them in complete darkness. Once the bulbs have met their chilling requirements (hyacinth – 12-15 weeks; crocus, daffodils, narcissus, and tulips – 15-17 weeks), move them to a cool location that received low to medium light. After about a week, you can move to a brighter and warmer location. Keep them watered and watch for blooms. Once they are done blooming, plant them in the garden for future blooms.

This week’s article is written by Jeannie Manis, a Wisconsin Certified Sauk County Master Gardener Volunteer. If you have any gardening questions, please contact the Extension Sauk County by emailing to tripp@wisc.edu or calling the University of Wisconsin Madison Division of Extension Sauk County office at 608-355-3250.