

THE GRAPEVINE



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A touch of spring in winter

As I wandered through the local grocery store this weekend I spied Amaryllis and Paperwhite bulb kits already being put out in anticipation of the upcoming winter season and boy did it bring back memories. Growing up in my parent's garden center we always forced bulbs to give us a touch of spring even on the coldest winter days. With some care and planning we could have beautiful blooming bulbs all winter long to make those days just a little brighter.

Forcing bulbs is easy but it does require some planning in advance. Any spring flowering bulb can be forced, but there are some that are simply easier than others. Hyacinths and daffodils are the easiest bulbs to force; however, tulips, crocus, grape hyacinth, and snowdrops can also work well. Bulbs can be planted in pots and chilled or forced in water but both methods require a chilling period before growing (except Paperwhites, but more on that later). When purchasing bulbs, look for large, firm bulbs without blemishes or damage.

Most bulbs will need to be planted in potting soil, with the exception of hyacinths that can be forced in just water. When planting in pots, use 4-8" pots, azalea style works best, but any pot and potting soil (not garden soil) will work. Add enough soil mixture to fill the pot so bulbs are placed as follows:

- Hyacinths and tulips: Allow only the tip of the bulb to show above the soil line.
- Daffodils: Plant so about one-half of the bulb shows above the soil line.
- Small bulbs (crocus, snowdrop, grape hyacinth, etc.): Plant so they will be about one inch below the soil line.

Set the bulbs in the pot. One large bulb may be placed in each 4-inch pot. Use six tulips, three hyacinths, five daffodils or 15 crocus (or other small bulb) in each 6-inch pot. All bulbs in a pot should be of the same kind and variety to ensure uniform flowering. Place tulips with the flattened side of the bulb toward the outside of the pot. The first drooping leaf of tulips comes from the flattened side and will then drape over the edge of the pot instead of into the pot. Fill around the bulbs with potting medium to the proper height. Firm the medium with light pressure, but avoid tight packing. After planting, the final potting medium line should be about 1/4 to 1/2 inch below the rim of the pot. Water the bulbs in.

After potting, keep the bulbs between 35-45 degrees with about 40 degrees F being ideal. An unheated garage, refrigerator, cellar, or cold frame are all options to keep your potted bulbs in. If bulbs are kept outdoors they should get adequate moisture to keep them growing, but if you are keeping bulbs inside be sure to water them so the soil stays damp. Roots should develop soon after potting; excellent root growth is essential to good growth and flower formation. Potted bulbs should be placed outdoors at least three weeks before the first hard freeze is expected. This is an important period for good root development.

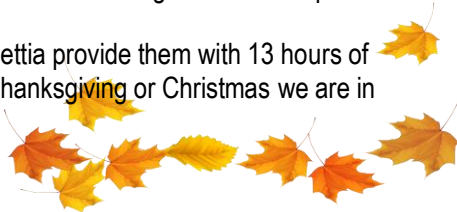

A few varieties may be brought indoors after about 12 weeks of cooling, but most will require 13 or 14 weeks to develop the necessary roots and top growth. Indoor forcing takes 3 to 4 weeks. To extend the bloom period, remove potted bulbs from storage at weekly intervals. If potting medium and tops are frozen when plants are brought indoors, place plants in a cool room (about 40 degrees F) for 2 or 3 days to thaw out slowly. Don't touch the plant tops when they are frozen. If plants are not frozen, bring them directly to a cool, bright window where temperatures range close to 60 degrees F; don't place them in direct sunlight. Keep bulbs watered, but fertilizer won't be needed.

When flower buds are almost fully developed, bring bulbs into a location where you can enjoy them. Keep the bulbs out of direct sunlight and if possible provide cooler nights to prolong the bloom time. Unfortunately, bulbs that have been forced usually don't transition to being planted outside well and should be discarded. A little bit of planning and work this fall can lead to some beautiful blooms during the depths of winter.

Blooming holiday cactus

The holiday cacti are coming!!! It's almost time for the Thanksgiving and Christmas cactus to start appearing in stores all over the area. Holiday cacti are relatively easy to help rebloom every year and will often bloom twice a year if conditions are right. It's time to provide your holiday cacti with a couple conditions to get beautiful blooms this winter.

Holiday cacti are short day plants and require long nights in order to bloom. Similar to a poinsettia provide them with 13 hours of darkness over 6-8 weeks in order to get blooms to initiate. If you want your holiday cacti to bloom for Thanksgiving or Christmas we are in



the window to start providing those hours of darkness to encourage blooms. Unlike poinsettias, holiday cacti have another way to get them to bloom. If holiday cacti have 6-8 weeks of night temperatures of chilly night air (50-60 degrees F) that will also encourage our cacti to initiate bloom buds. A cool garage, outside on a covered porch (be sure the temperatures don't get too cold) or a basement can provide the needed temperatures to encourage bloom buds.

Once you have bloom buds initiated be careful not to "shock" your plants with cool drafts, getting too dry or too little humidity can cause the plant to drop their buds. The buds will last longer if kept in cooler temperatures; however, they will still provide a beautiful display under most home temperatures.

These beautiful tropical cacti can be kept for decades, I have one in my home that is well over 100 years old right now, and provide a beautiful bloom display year after year. Once they are done blooming, treat them like a houseplant with bright indirect light and water when the top few inches of the soil dry out. Once our temperatures warm up in the spring, move the plants outside in an area that gets partial sun (3-6 hours of sunlight) and fertilize on a regular basis.

Succulent pumpkin displays

Every fall as I scroll through Facebook or Pinterest I always find beautiful pictures of succulent pumpkins to use as centerpieces or just for decoration. These beautiful displays are fairly simple and inexpensive to make, often you already have the supplies at home already. All you need are a pumpkin, hot glue gun, moss and succulent cuttings. Here are some instructions on how to make a beautiful display this fall:

- The first step is to find a pumpkin or winter squash with a flat top. The "princess" varieties or smaller varieties similar to the picture work well. The flat tops help keep the succulents in place.
- Once you have your pumpkin use the hot glue or a spray adhesive to attach the moss to the top of the pumpkin. It is easier to work in smaller sections so the glue doesn't cool before you can get your moss securely attached.
- The next step is my favorite. Now you will glue your cuttings to your moss. I usually try to figure out where I want my cuttings to go before I start gluing. Try to use taller cuttings in the middle to create a mounded look. Gradually use shorter cuttings as you move away from the stem. String of pearls or burro's tail cuttings work great around the very edge to trail over your pumpkin. (Note: the cuttings will not be harmed by the hot glue and will slowly start to root through it.)
- Since we didn't cut into the pumpkin it should last a long time. Place your pumpkin in a bright lit area to keep the succulents growing and happy. You can spray the moss and succulents as they start to look dry, approximately once a week, to keep them happy. Once the pumpkin starts to go bad it is easy to pull the succulents off of it and plant them in succulent soil to start new plants for the future.



Garden tools

As we hang up our gardening tools for the year it is important to take care of them so they will last for years. When we water the yard or landscape for the last time this fall ensure your garden hose is drained and stored for the winter. This step should be done before a hard freeze to protect the hose and your faucet and store your hose in an area out of direct sunlight to prolong its life.

Garden tools such as shovels, hoes and rakes often have wooden handles that will slowly deteriorate due to exposure to sunlight, moisture and other elements. This can easily lead to rough patches and splinters from our favorite tools. Keeping them stored inside when possible will slow this process however over time the tools will still have some natural wear and tear. Take sometime this winter to check the handles for splinters and sand down rough areas then apply a protective coat (linseed oil, wood preservative, polyurethane, etc) to the handle to keep it protected. Don't forget about the metal part of the tool, make sure it's clean of dirt and debris and apply a light application of oil to prevent rust. Good tools are expensive and a few minutes of work this fall can pay off big time for the future.

Sweet Potatoes

Sweet potatoes will continue to develop tubers throughout the growing season and it takes from Mid- September till mid-October for the fleshy roots to enlarge to a harvest stage. It can be tempting to dig the tubers early but since the sweet potatoes don't deteriorate in quality as they get better this is one vegetable that it is better to wait on. Be sure to dig the tubers before freezing weather occurs to prevent damage to the tubers. Before you dig your sweet potatoes, cut or chop the vines a few days before to make the digging easier. After the tubers have been dug, let them air dry for a few hours and gently place them in baskets or boxes to avoid injury. The potatoes will need to "cure" for 1-2 weeks in a warm humid location to improve keeping quality and shelf life. Keep the tubers in a cool dark location once they have cured.