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Bring Spring Indoors

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It is getting late to plant spring flowering bulbs outside, but you can enjoy them inside. This article tells you how. It is edited from materials written by Henry Clay, retired Extension Horticulturist and edited by Mary Lynn Dukes, Houston County Master Gardener.

Many Georgia Gardeners look forward to spring and the colors it brings. The yellows, reds and lavenders are a promise of summer's coming. Now you can enjoy these colors indoors. With a little bit of care and patience, spring flowering bulbs like narcissus, tulips, and daffodils can be forced to bloom inside.

Forcing bulbs means manipulating conditions (light, humidity, temperature) so the bulbs believe that spring has arrived and bloom. Most spring flowering bulbs need a long period of cool temperatures before blooming. During this time the bulb grows roots and forms flower shoots inside the bulb. Good drainage and proper light are also essential for good growth.

Not all bulbs are created equally when it comes to force blooming. Narcissus and hyacinths are easiest to force but you can also try tulips, crocus, daffodils, muscari and others.

Selecting Bulbs and Containers

When selecting bulbs for indoor forcing, bigger is better. Larger bulbs have more stored food which means a greater chance of success. Bulbs should be firm, large and healthy looking. Pick bulbs that show no signs of withering, disease, mold or insect damage.

The best containers for bulb forcing are 'bulb pans'. These are shallow, wide clay pots that provide excellent drainage and lots of room for bulbs. However, any clay or plastic container with drainage holes will work. Wash reused pots with a dilute bleach solution (one part bleach, nine parts water) before planting into them.

The best soil for growing bulbs is a loose, friable, well drained loam. It is best to use a sterile, artificial soil mix with a high percentage of vermiculite. Avoid using garden soil. It is full of weeds and diseases.

Soak clay pots for 24 hours before using. Place one inch of gravel in bottom of pot and add some soil. Arrange bulbs so they are almost touching. Cover bulbs and firm soil around them. Most bulbs are covered by ½ inch of soil except for hyacinths that may protrude slightly above the soil line. Water to settle soil. Keep soil moist but not wet or soggy as bulbs will rot if kept too wet.

Store containers with bulbs in a dark place at 40o to 50o F for l0 to l2 weeks - a little longer for tulips (l5 weeks). The best location is probably an old refrigerator that does not cool well. Bulbs can be chilled in any refrigerator, but must not freeze.

Flowering

Bulbs should be well rooted after the cooling period. Roots may have grown out the drainage holes with shoots appearing above the soil line. Rooted bulbs are kept in a dimly lit, cool (50o-60oF) room for about 10 - 14 days. Then move pots into a well-lit room of about 50o-60oF. Water regularly and keep pots from drafts and heaters. Time to bloom will vary with variety but they should bud within 4 to 6 weeks. Flowers will last longer if kept cool. After bloom you may transfer bulbs to the garden or discard since forced bulbs seldom bloom well again.

Various bulbs will respond differently to forcing. You might try planting several types of bulbs and note the results. If at first you do not succeed, try again. Planning, patience and experience will help you succeed at forcing flowering bulbs and bringing spring inside during dreary winter days. For more information, contact the Houston County Extension Service at 542-2020 in Warner Robins or 987-2028 in Perry.