

Forcing Spring-Blooming Bulbs

Overview: Planting spring-blooming bulbs in your outdoor garden is not only a great way to introduce these fascinating plants to kids, it is also a way to develop skills in patience and delayed gratification. However, if you do not want to wait for winter to pass or if you live in an area that does not receive enough cold weather for spring-blooming bulbs, you can force them. Forcing is the process of exposing bulbs to necessary cold temperatures (usually accomplished by placing them in a refrigerator) and then planting them in an environment that makes them think it is time to grow.

Materials:

- 6-inch pots
- potting soil
- assortment of spring-blooming bulbs

Approximate Time to Complete: 12 weeks

Location: Indoor

Ages: All ages

Season: Any season (although spring-blooming bulbs are generally available for purchase during fall months)

Instructions:

1. Purchase hardy bulbs for forcing in the fall. This is when they are commonly available from garden centers and seed companies. If you won't be planting them right away, store bulbs in a cool (40 to 50 degrees), dry, dark spot. Because bulbs are living things, you shouldn't leave them unplanted for long. Try to plant the bulbs within a month or two.
2. Plant bulbs in 6-inch pots filled with moist soilless mix (three bulbs per pot). Bury the bulbs to their tips, with pointed ends facing up. No fertilizer is needed since they have their own food stored within.
3. Place bulbs in a cold (below 50 degrees F but above freezing) place (garage, cold frame, or refrigerator) for 8-14 weeks. Since these bulbs are generally planted outdoors in the fall for a spring bloom, this cold treatment will simulate the winter conditions necessary for formation of roots. When you see roots peeking from the drainage holes of the pots, you'll know your bulbs have had sufficient chilling time.
4. Next, move the containers inside and put them under normal indoor light for two weeks. Then put them under your indoor garden lights or onto a windowsill. They should bloom in two to four weeks. Once they have begun blooming, remove them from the bright lights of the indoor garden to encourage a longer bloom period.
5. Forcing takes a lot out of bulbs and they generally cannot be forced again. Discard the plants after the flowers fade. (Add them to your compost pile if you have one.)

Note: For faster results, you can plant bulbs that do not need a cold treatment to bloom such as paperwhites or amaryllis.