

# In the Garden with Shobha Vanchiswar



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## **Start an early spring, indoors, by forcing bulbs**

I have received a number of inquiries regarding forcing bulbs indoors. Many of you are aware that I do this every year. It is a tradition for me to start an early spring indoors, as it makes the long, dark winter months that much more bearable. Most of your questions have to do with exactly which bulbs I'm forcing and how precisely I go about forcing them. While I'm happy to share my method and this year's bulb list, I hope you will experiment and acquire your own preferences of bulbs. Please get back to me and share both your failures and successes.

Amaryllis and paperwhites do not need to be pre-cooled. All other bulbs for indoor forcing must be cooled prior to forcing. Essentially, you are trying to fool the bulb. The cooling mimics winter and signals dormancy to the bulbs. After the requisite length of cooling, when subjected to the indoor ambient temperature, the bulbs think it is spring and begin to awaken. Shortly thereafter, perhaps a couple of weeks or so, they will grow and bloom and voila! Behold an early spring in the comfort of your cozy home while winter

rages outside.

Nurseries begin selling bulbs at the end September and I get my bulbs for indoor forcing from the local places. This permits me to begin the cooling process early enough so that I can start forcing by mid-January. The mail ordered bulbs arrive later in October right on time for outdoor planting. In fact, the order I made in early summer has only just arrived.

### ***Carefully labeled brown bags in the refrigerator***

Once purchased, I separate out the different types of bulbs. Each variety of bulb is placed into a labeled paper sack. Each type of bulb has a specific cooling time and it is essential to give them that required length of time. I cool my bulbs in the refrigerator. They usually occupy an entire shelf. Warn other family members to stay away from them or else . . .

I label each brown bag of bulbs with the type, color and variety of bulb inside, and I also put the date on which they can be taken out for forcing. At the same time, I put that information on my calendar. As the winter progresses, I relish the anticipation of knowing how close I am to starting my personal spring. And I enjoy selecting the containers for forcing, the bulb combinations, and deciding which will be forced in water and which in soil. In my experience, bulbs forced in water, mostly hyacinths, tend to bloom sooner than those in soil.

When potting different bulbs in a single pot, remember, each type is cooled separately and then planted together. That is, say you want crocuses and hyacinths blooming in one pot, time the cooling periods of the two types of bulbs so they can be ready at the same time for potting together. It takes a bit of foresight and planning. But it's oh so worth it!

### ***Amaryllis and paperwhites in time for December and January***

I store the amaryllis and paperwhites in a cool dry place in the basement till the time I pot them up. I time the potting up so that the bulbs will be in bloom around the desired time, which is usually through December and January. If they are to be given as gifts, I plant so they have just begun to grow when presented. This way, the recipient will get the pleasure of watching it grow and bloom.

The amaryllis from past years do indeed re-bloom but much later in the winter. Some of mine bloom in early spring. If you have old amaryllis plants, be patient.

### ***My selection of bulbs for indoor forcing this year:***

<u>Bulbs</u>	<u>Cooling period</u>	<u>Will bloom in</u>
Hyacinths: Carnegie (white) and Jan Bos (deep pink).	12-14 weeks.	2-3 weeks
Muscari: latifolium (blue) and Botryoides -album (white)	14-15 weeks	2-3 weeks
Crocus: botanical Prins Claus and ssp.sublimus tricolor	14 weeks	2 weeks
Vernus: crocus Jeanne d'Arc	14 weeks	2 weeks
Scilla: nutans Blue bells	12-15 weeks	2-3 weeks
Daffodils: double yellow Cheerfulness and Poeticus - Actea	12-14 weeks	2-3 weeks
Tulips: Parrot tulipa (white)	16 to 18 weeks	2-3 weeks

When planting the bulbs for forcing, I place them so the soil in the pot is only half way up the bulbs. All the exposed soil is covered with moss or stones to give an attractive, finished look. Stones are particularly useful in stabilizing bulbs that tend to tip over as they get top heavy. The pots are watered so the soil is always damp but never wet. They are placed in a cool but well lit part of the house. When the bulbs begin to bloom, I move them to areas where they will be viewed and enjoyed but not subjected to heat or drafts. The flowers will stay in bloom longer.

#### Outdoor alternative to forcing blubs

Another way to force bulbs is to pot up first and then cool them either in a big refrigerator or in a well protected area outdoors. After the cooling time, simply bring out the pots and let the bulbs grow. I don't keep a second refrigerator and I've found that depending on the outdoor cooling method is a bit iffy as temperatures can fluctuate. Indian summer in October or a sudden early January thaw can spoil everything. Besides, potting up the bulbs after cooling gives me the flexibility to play around with containers and bulb combinations. In addition, the space they take up in the kitchen refrigerator is a fine excuse to minimize grocery shopping.

As for my outdoor bulbs, they are scheduled to be planted this weekend. There are over 500 of them. My body is protesting loudly in advance. Perhaps I ought to play it safe and book a massage for later.

*Shobha Vanchiswar has been gardening all her life, the last 21 years in*

*Chappaqua. She received the Golden Trowel Award for garden design in 2007 from Garden Design magazine. Her jewel-of-a-garden here in New Castle was on view in this year's Garden Conservancy Open Day program. She has a garden design business, **Seeds of Design**. Write her at [seedsofdesign@verizon.net](mailto:seedsofdesign@verizon.net). Frontpage painting and paintings in slide show are Shobha's works.*