BROOKLYN BOTANIC GARDEN

BULBS FOR INDOORS

Year-round Windowsill Splendor
Flowering bulbs, the perfect antidote to the winter blahs, can bloom on a windowsill while plants outdoors await the warmth of spring sun to flower. This handy guide tells readers how to force spectacular tulips, fragrant hyacinths, and other hardy bulbs for a head start on spring, and how to grow rare tender bulbs from the tropics and subtropics, which bloom in winter, spring, summer, and fall.

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Caladiums are prized for their brightly colored, heart-shaped foliage. Depending upon the variety, leaves sport a range of colors, including white, green, pink, red, maroon, orange and bronze. Although caladiums are tropical plants hardy only in Sunset's Climate Zones H2, 25 and 27, they grow year-round indoors in any climate. Potted caladiums add interest, color and style to indoor spaces, allowing you to utilize these plants in your interior design. Caladiums grown in decorative pots become a living work of art worthy of showcase in your home.

Keep the plant 4 to 6 feet away from the window to avoid exposing it to fluctuating temperatures through the glass. Place the plant in a room with a constant temperature above 65 degrees Fahrenheit. Move the plants away from air conditioners or heat vents to provide them with a consistent temperature.

Water caladium plants when the top surface of the soil begins to dry out. Do not let the soil dry completely. Keep the soil evenly moist but not soggy. Pour the water directly into the pot with a watering can slowly, so as not to splash the leaves. Fill the pot with water two to three times, or until water begins to drain from the container's bottom. Discard any standing water in the drainage tray to avoid causing root dieback.

Apply an all-purpose water-soluble fertilizer once every two to three weeks. Fertilize caladium plants only when they are actively growing and producing new leaves in the spring through fall. Mix 1/2 teaspoon of fertilizer with 1 gallon of water. Pour the mixture into the pot, and allow the excess to drain through, discarding it when it has finished filling the drainage tray.

Wipe dust and water spots from the surface of the caladium's leaves with a soft cloth or duster. Rub the surface of the leaves carefully to avoid causing damage. Use a leaf cleaning spray if spots or dust doesn't wipe off easily. Clean caladium leaves once per month to ensure glossy leaves that can absorb sufficient amounts of sunlight.

Jessica Westover began writing professionally in 2010. She has worked at various greenhouse production facilities and more recently as a personal banking assistant for Zions Bank. Westover graduated from Brigham Young University Idaho in 2005 with a Bachelor of Science in horticulture and a minor in accounting.

Fuzzy-leafed gesneriads, kohlerias (Kohleria spp.) originated in Mexico and South America. They produce tubular and often speckled flowers in a variety of colors, and their foliage can be decorative as well. Although hardy in U.S. Department of Agriculture plant hardiness zones 10 and 11, they are easily damaged by excess water, so they are usually grown as houseplants. Their culture is similar to that of African violets, but the height of kohlerias varies from 6 inches up to 4 feet.

Acquire some kohleria rhizomes in late winter or early spring; cut them into 1-inch pieces. Fill 2 1/2-inch-diameter seedling pots to within an inch of their rims with African violet potting soil. Lay one rhizome horizontally on top of the soil in each pot, and cover it with 1/2 inch of additional soil.

Water the kohlerias with lukewarm water only when the surface of the soil is dry to the touch. Don't
use cold water, and avoid splashing their fuzzy leaves, which can cause spotting. Set the pots on trays of gravel, if possible, so evaporation from the water accumulating in the trays will increase the humidity around the plants. Make sure the level of that water stays below the surface of the gravel.

Allow the plants to die back if they seem inclined to do so during the winter months. Place them in a cool, dark room where the temperatures remain between 50 and 60 degrees Fahrenheit, and keep them barely damp until they begin to sprout again. Return them then to their windowsill or grow light and their preferred temperatures between 60 and 80 degrees F.

"Take some strong clumps, not too large, say two or three years old. Leave the earth on them, take them up just before the ground freezes, put them in large pots and place in a cool cellar. It will not hurt them to freeze. If they do, let the frost come out gradually. Then bring them up to the light and put them in the south window and you can have flowers through February and March, and by planting white ones you can have beautiful Easter flowers. . . . Grown in the house they will be more beautiful and delicate than if grown out of doors . . . ."

"The expense will be small and the results extremely satisfactory. Sheltered from the weather they will continue longer in bloom than out of doors. Other winter flowers are expensive but these you can secure at little cost and when you get started you can get them from your own garden. It will be found that this immense family will furnish such a variety in bloom and in color they will be a constant surprise and delight."

Will this actually work? We have to admit we're a bit skeptical, but we just potted up a couple of iris for our unheated back room and a couple more for our basement refrigerator. (We doubt that any modern cellar is cold enough to keep iris dormant.) Watch for a report on our results here in the spring, and if you're adventurous enough to try it yourself, please let us know how it goes for you! (Nov. 2013)

You can enjoy spring flowers all winter long by forcing almost any bulb to bloom indoors — if you order them NOW. Some are so simple even kindergarteners can do it (Lady Derby hyacinth, for example, now at 20% off), while others are a bit more challenging. For inspiration and tips, see our Forcing Bulbs How-To page and our Forcing Bulbs newsletter archives.

Betsy Ginsburg at GardenersApprentice.com blogs about her quest for holy grail plants such as our Double Yellow hyacinth in Hyacinth Discovery and tells the story of our Frances Willard peony and the women behind it in A Peony's Tale.

And last but far from least, Elizabeth Licata of GardenRant.com recently turned me on to Leaf, a terrific online garden magazine. In its autumn issue you'll find Elizabeth's article on Artful Forcing, a piece about John Shipton, the grower in Wales who we get our true English bluebells from, and even a short article about the growing popularity of artisanal American corn whiskey. (Sept. 2012)

Every fall we plant daffodils in pots of soil and force them into bloom to brighten up the dreary days of our long Michigan winter. (Are you feeling any cooler yet?) Last November we tried something different: forcing the classic yellow daffodil Carlton on pebbles as if it were a paperwhite. We carefully chilled five bulbs in the refrigerator until January and then set them on a bed of pebbles, kept them watered, and waited hopefully. After a couple of weeks they bloomed beautifully. The nice, fat bulbs sent up ten gorgeous yellow blooms (a bit paler than when they bloom outdoors) and they lasted a full week. We all kept wandering over to enjoy their subtle fragrance, which is a nice change from the more powerful scent of paperwhites and other tazettas. Although we knew that Carlton forced well in pots (we've done this for years), we were pleasantly surprised to discover that they force just as happily on pebbles.

"February and March are my favorite gardening months," our good customer Carole Bolton wrote us last week — from snowed-in Coldwater, Michigan, where temperatures were
well below freezing and the sun hadn’t been seen for days. Had she lost her mind? Quite the contrary! For years now, Carole has been forcing hyacinths indoors every winter — lots of hyacinths — and this year’s “are especially beautiful,” she wrote. “They’re healthy, tall and fully flowered. They make the freezing rain and weather advisories bearable.”

Julie Berk has fallen in love with forcing vases, and she’s sharing her enthusiasm in a brand-new website, hyacinthvases.org.uk. There you’ll find colorful photos of all sorts of vases, images from antique books and catalogs (don’t miss the Etruscan Revival vases), reports on her latest bulb-shopping forays, and a “Collectors Community” for email discussions with fellow enthusiasts. Though far from slick, the site is well worth exploring, and Julie has big plans for developing it as an educational resource. Give it a look! (Nov. 2009)

1. No bulbs? No problem. Local garden centers in many areas are selling bulbs now at clearance prices, so go get yourself some bargains. If you see ‘Erlicheer’ narcissus, grab them. Elizabeth Licata of Garden Rant likes forcing them so well that she declared this “The Year of Erlicheer.” Pick up a few hyacinths to force on water and, if you’re feeling lucky, a handful of tulips.

2. No forcing vases? No problem. A handful of glass pebbles in a tall water glass is all you need to support paperwhites or ‘Erlicheer’. (Look for Akasha Crystals, headquartered here in Ann Arbor and available everywhere.) Wedge a hyacinth into a Pilsner glass or suspend it over the mouth of a jar or vase by sticking toothpicks into it just like you did with sweet potatoes when you were a kid. Tulips need to be forced in soil, but that’s no harder than growing anything else in a pot.

To prevent your paperwhites from getting tall and floppy, give them a good stiff drink. It’s true! Scientific testing by Professor Bill Miller of Cornell’s Flower Bulb Research Program confirmed that paperwhites grown in water with a 5% concentration of alcohol bloomed beautifully on stems one-third shorter than teetotaling paperwhites. Since most liquors are about 40% alcohol, that works out to 1 part booze to 7 parts water. Gin, vodka, whiskey, rum, and tequila all work well, but Miller cautions that, just as with humans, too much alcohol is disastrous. To read his entire entertaining report, click here. (Dec. 2006)

Here’s an almost unbelievably easy way to coax fragrant hyacinths into bloom on your winter windowsill. Though books and experts may tell you it’s impossible, our customers showed us that it really works. Simply refrigerate your bulbs DRY IN A PAPER BAG for at least ten weeks, then put them on water AT NORMAL ROOM TEMPERATURE to grow roots and leaves and bloom. Easiest of all are ‘Lady Derby’ and ‘L’Innocence’; other varieties may need more time in the fridge. We’ll send instructions with every order, or you can read them online right now. (2006-07 catalog)

American gardeners of the 1800s loved forcing hyacinths in special vases for winter bloom. The practice dates back to the mid-1700s when Madame Pompadour, influential mistress of Louis XV, had hundreds of hyacinths forced in vases at Versailles. Today, antique hyacinth glasses are collected worldwide. For a glimpse of the immense collection of Dutch enthusiast Wim Granneman, visit http://www.kennemerend.nl/bollenglazen. Among other treats, Wim’s homespun site offers a link to Querbeet, a German garden shop offering many forcing vases, including a reproduction from 1888, and the world’s only book about them, Hyacinthen Glaser.

While the bulbs you’re forcing are rooting, a temperature between 35 and 50 degrees is essential. If it’s not cold enough long enough, the bulbs can’t do the chemical reactions they need to do to grow and flower. You’ll know you’ve short-changed them if the flower stems are weirdly short, sometimes blooming while barely out of the bulb itself. But if the temperature is too low, rooting and growth can be VERY slow. A max-min or high-low thermometer (available from many good garden centers) is one easy solution.
If small bits of powdered charcoal be mixed with the earth, it imparts great depth and brilliancy of color to the flowers, and a dark, rich green to the foliage. Bone shavings or horn scrapings assist a full development of foliage and flower. If the plants are watered once a fort-night with a very weak solution of glue, or a few drops of hartshorn added to the water, the same effect with be produced. (1999-2000 catalog)

Can I plant my hyacinths in my garden after I force them indoors? That's a question we're often asked. Here's one testimonial from our long-time customer Bonnie Jean Malcolm of Essex, Massachusetts, writing of gardening at her former home in the San Bernardino Mountains of California:

I force my hyacinths in hyacinth jars. After they stop blooming, I take them out of the water and lay them on a paper bag and let them dry. . . . In the fall, I plant them outside with plant food (whatever kind I have). . . . I had read that one should just throw away forced bulbs, as they never did well, but I couldn't bear to throw away such lovely bulbs. . . . Mine settled in and multiplied and I got good blooms. (1999-2000 catalog)

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