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Flower Tips
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Flower Tips

FORCING PAPER-WHITE NARCISSUS

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Illustrations by John D. Warbach, Urban Planning and Landscape Architecture

Forcing paper-white narcissus indoors can bring a touch of spring in the middle of winter. Pots of paper-white grandiflora blooming throughout the winter are a cheery sight. They make a spectacular and much appreciated gift for winter-weary friends, children, shut-ins, and people in hospitals and retirement homes. Paper-whites can be grown in a sunny window at room temperature. A succession of pots can provide bloom from late fall to early spring.

The paper-white grandiflora is commonly referred to as a polyanthus, or bunch-flowered narcissus. The bright yellow 'Soleil d'Or' is another beautiful narcissus. The flowers of both are circular and 1 to 2 inches in diameter, and they have a sweet fragrance that most people find attractive.

Large, top quality bulbs can be purchased from garden centers, florists and mail order firms specializing in bulbs, starting in mid-September. Begin to pot the bulbs at the beginning of October. If you purchase your paper-whites before Oct. 1, store them in a dry, airy place at 38 to 40 degrees F—or as close to that temperature as possible—to keep the bulbs from sprouting before you are ready for them.

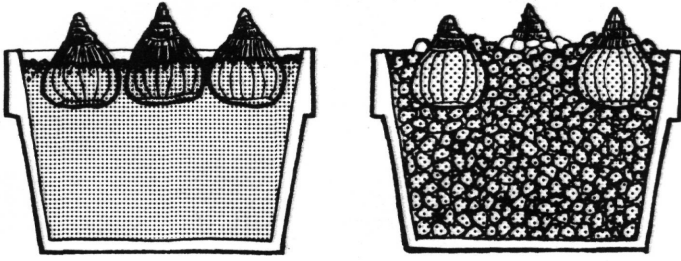
Paper-whites can be forced either in a good potting medium or in water and pebbles.

Potting Medium Culture

There are two considerations in forcing paper-whites in potting media—the type of medium and the container. Acceptable potting media are available from your local garden center. Paper-whites do not require a rich soil, but they need a medium that is well drained and one that allows ample root growth. If you plan to prepare your own, a good medium would be 1 part peat moss, 1 part loamy soil and 1 part sand.

Traditional clay pots are excellent for use in forcing bulbs in soil. Decorative containers, such as plastic or ceramic pots, and metal containers may be used. In fact, almost anything that is at least 3 to 5 inches deep and has holes in the bottom for drainage may be used.

Fill the container with potting medium so that about one-third of the top of each bulb when planted will be



Bulbs may be grown in potting media (left) or pebbles and water (right)

above the top of the pot. The bulbs should be set about 1 to 2 inches apart. Fill in around the bulbs with potting medium and gently firm the medium around the bulbs. A 6-inch pot with four or five large, top quality bulbs makes a fine display. After potting the bulbs, water thoroughly from the bottom by standing the pot in a pan of water. After the medium has settled, it should be covering the lower one-third of each bulb. The finished pot may then be placed in a cool, sunny window at room temperature. Or, for better results—i.e., shorter leaves and flower stalks—place it in a cool (50 to 60 degrees F), dark area for about two weeks before moving it into a warmer, sunny location. Check the container regularly to make sure the medium remains moist.

Water Culture Procedure

We are so used to associating the growing of a flowering plant with a pot containing a potting medium that forcing paper-whites in water and pebbles appears to be an act of magic. This type of forcing is especially rewarding to share with children.

Begin by selecting a low, wide container 3 to 5 inches deep. There should be no drainage holes in the bottom. Clay, glass or ceramic bowls are acceptable. The anchoring material can be any type of small pebble or gravel, from pea size to 1/2 inch in diameter; you can even use marbles. Be sure to wash and drain the anchoring material before using it in the container.

Fill the container about half to three-fourths full of pebbles or gravel. Gently place the bulbs on this bed of pebbles, placing them close together so that they almost touch one another. Help anchor the bulbs by heaping pebbles or gravel around them. Again, the number of bulbs used will be determined by their size and the size of the container. Usually three bulbs for a 4-inch container or five for a 6-inch container are satisfactory.

Gently pour in water at the side of the container. The bulbs have a tendency to decay at the base, so be especially careful to keep the water level from touching the base of the bulbs. Keeping the container in a cool, dark place for two weeks before placing it in a warm, sunny location is recommended but not essential. Add water as evaporation and root uptake deplete the supply. No fertilizer applications are necessary. Do not disturb the bulbs after planting—the roots are delicate.

General Information

To have a succession of paper-whites in bloom through the winter, plant a container every 10 days from Oct. 1 to March 1. Root growth speeds up considerably from October to March. Bulbs planted in October may take as long as three weeks to root, while those started in February need only 10 days. Sometimes it is difficult to keep the bulbs dormant, especially as spring approaches. If any of the stored bulbs show signs of sprouting, plant them as soon as possible. Label the containers so you will have a record of the planting and blooming dates. This will assist you in planning next year's planting and flowering schedule.

The cooler the room, the longer it will take for the flowers to bloom and the longer the bulbs will remain in flower. If you must keep your plants in a warm room, try to place them in a cooler room at night. Sometimes the flower stalks tend to be tall and leggy. They can be supported by inserting thin sticks or bamboo canes into the medium or pebbles and tying the stalks to these supports. Remember to turn your pots in a sunny window every day so all sides of the plant receive equal sunlight. Remove the flower stalks after the flowers fade. The attractive, grasslike foliage will keep growing for several weeks and can be enjoyed for the greenery it provides. Paper-whites are tender bulbs that cannot be overwintered in Northern climates. Once the leaves start turning yellow, the bulbs should be discarded along with the potting medium (gravel could be washed and stored until needed next year). Be sure to wash containers used for forcing in pebbles to remove salt and lime deposits before they harden.

Forcing paper-white narcissus is a very rewarding venture that could be done by more indoor gardeners. It is an especially good project for elementary school children, because the procedures are very simple and the chances of success are very high.

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