

Forcing Bulbs

Forcing bulbs is a bit of garden magic! When you “force” a bulb, you are tricking it into thinking its dormancy period is over and it’s time to bloom. Your bulb will begin to grow and give you flowers ahead of its regular schedule. Around Christmas, people will commonly force amaryllis and paperwhite bulbs. Crocus, daffodil, and tulip bulbs are other popular options for forcing.

Forced bulbs can be planted in the garden, but they may not bloom well again for at least two years as they reset themselves. There is also a chance they won’t bloom again at all. But they won’t go to waste – add them to your compost pile so they can provide nutrients to other plants in your garden.

Prechilling

Most bulbs need to be chilled for around 10-12 weeks in your fridge’s vegetable drawer or an unheated garage. Check your chosen bulb’s provided directions for their minimum prechilling time. Keep this timing in mind and plan ahead if you want blooms by a certain time!

Place each variety of bulb in a separate labeled paper bag. If you are prechilling in the fridge, make sure there’s no fresh fruit inside. Fruit releases ethylene gas, which can cause bulbs to rot. If you are prechilling in the garage or a shed, watch out for rodents! Mice and rats will eat most bulbs, but some are toxic to them.

Method 1: Forcing Bulbs in Water

1. Fill a glass vase with 2” to 3” of rocks or glass beads.
2. Place your prechilled (if needed) bulbs on top. You don’t need to dig the bulbs in – just rest them on the rocks or beads. Keep them close together for a more eye-catching arrangement. The mature flowers can also support each other as they grow.
3. Fill up the vase with just enough water to reach the base of the bulbs, but don’t submerge them or they may rot.
4. Place the vase in a cool, dark area for 4 to 8 weeks. Check on them occasionally and add water as needed to keep the water line at the bulbs’ base.
5. When you see roots and leaves, move the vase to a bright area.

Method 2: Forcing Bulbs in Soil

1. Choose a container with a drainage hole that allows 3” to 4” of room below the bulbs for their roots to grow.
2. Fill the container with a well-draining potting mix.
3. Plant your bulbs halfway into the soil with their pointed tops poking out. Water the bulbs thoroughly.
4. Keep the container in a cool, dark area until you see leaves. Check on them occasionally and add water as needed.
5. When you see leaves, move them to a bright area.

