

# **Helen Haskell's Spring Bulb Forcing Guidelines**

**Edited and Revised from the Archives by  
The Garden Club of Darien Horticulture Committee  
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## **Bulb Planting**

### **Materials Needed:**

- Bulbs – Exhibition size bulbs are best but second size will force as well. Make sure bulbs are good and firm and early blooming variety. You never want to plant a soft bulb.
- Pots – 6”, 7”, or 8” bulb pans. If pots are new, soak them in water overnight or for two nights. Old pots should be soaked and scrubbed clean. This pot soaking is very important.
- Soil – 2 parts loam, 1 part peat or leaf mold and 1 part sand.
- Broken clay pots, gravel, paper towels, potting soil, bonemeal and oak leaves.

### **Potting Procedure:**

1. Place a flat piece of broken pot or a piece of paper towel over the drainage hole in the bottom of the pot. Then place a few other pieces of broken pot or gravel to cover the entire bottom and provide good drainage.
2. Add several oak leaves.
3. Fill pot half full with potting mixture and bang to settle into crevices for a firm base for bulbs. Sprinkle one tablespoon of bonemeal on top of soil and mix thoroughly so that it will not burn the bulbs. Place bulbs nearly touching, twisting them into position so that they have good contact with the soil.
4. Fill with more soil to within one inch of the rim and so that the tips of the bulbs are one-half inch above the soil. Firm soil around the bulbs.
5. Water thoroughly by bottom soaking in a pan until the soil is moist. You can also leave the pot of bulbs in a pan of water for two days, but this additional soaking is optional.
6. Leave pots out-doors in a sunny spot for four or five days to promote root growth. Make certain your outdoor space is safe from critters.

## **Hibernation**

1. On the sixth day you should bring your bulbs into an appropriate hibernation place, such as your garage, cellar or attic where the temperature is 35 to 45 degrees F.
2. Most bulbs need a cooling period, or “fake winter”, for 13-18 weeks. To trick the bulbs into thinking that they have been through winter dormancy in normal outdoor conditions, you must provide complete darkness and cold temperatures. The optimal cold

temperature is anywhere between 40 and 45 degrees F.

3. To achieve this, any of the following will work: set the pots in saucers in an unheated garage, covered by an inverted brown paper supermarket bag, on a shelf safe from animals. A cold frame also works well by setting the pots in clean sand up to their rims. Add a layer of salt hay, about 3-4 inches deep. Any glass on the cold frame should be covered over with black plastic, (such as garbage bags), to occlude any light. The least preferred method is an old fashioned refrigerator that is not frost-free. Place the pots in saucers on the shelves of the refrigerated portion of the unit. This method is not that reliable and the closed environment of the refrigerator encourages mold growth. If this is the only available method, remember to leave the door open for 20 minutes each day and be sure to treat any mold seen with an organic fungicide.

4. Keeping your bulbs moist, but not wet, is extremely important. During the first couple of weeks, check the pots weekly. If the soil looks at all dry, then fill the saucers about halfway with water allowing the pots to absorb the water through the bottom drainage holes of the pot. After 4-6 hours tip out any remaining water. For cold frame chilling, use a sprinkle top watering can to simulate rain! Just pour it right through the salt hay.

5. Sometimes, mold can develop on the surface of the soil. Spraying with a fungicide controls the situation well. If you notice aphid-like insects flying near the soil of the pots, use an insecticidal soap to control the situation.

## **Bringing Bulbs into Bloom**

### **The Forcing Period:**

1. Depending on the bulb variety, begin removing pots from cold storage 5-8 weeks before they are needed in full bloom. Smaller bulbs such as miniature iris should be left until 3 weeks before they are needed.
2. Be extremely careful when removing the pots from either the cold frame or handling bulbs in the garage or refrigerator. Particularly in the garage or cold frame situations, any growth can be frozen and therefore very fragile. Bulbs such as tulips can be as tall as 5" already. Remove any straw or sand carefully from the pots.
3. The first step in the forcing process is to give the pots a bit of light to allow them to begin greening up. Pots chilled in an unheated garage can simply have their brown paper bags removed. Pots in a cold frame or refrigerator must be brought into an unheated space, safe from animals, that has some light. If a garage is used, a simple garage window will provide plenty of light. Do not allow the pots direct sunlight, yet!
4. Pots that were in a cold frame should be given saucers at this point.
5. Water the bulbs after 2-3 days or sooner if they look dry. Now is also an excellent time to give the pots their first good cleaning if the bulbs will be shown in their forcing pots. Brillo pads or Lime Away with a brush are useful for cleaning, and please use Vegetable oil, Pam, or Pledge, not olive oil. This initial cleaning makes grooming much easier later.
6. After a total of 6-7 days, move the pots into a bright room in your home, preferably one with an independent thermostat. Set the thermostat for 60 degrees F and keep the pots

out of full sun. If the room is naturally sunny, light filtered by sheer curtains is fine. Direct hot sun risks burning at this point. After a few days raise the temperature to 65 degrees F.

7. At this point in the process, your pots should all have green growth showing, if not already several inches high. You can now groom your pots a little bit further by trimming stray leaves from the tops of the pots. Rotate the pots 1/4 turn each day and feed with a weak solution of balanced water-soluble fertilizer every week. (Shultz' Drops work well. Just put a few drops in your watering can once a week.) Water as needed and make sure to never let the pots dry out!

8. As the foliage and eventually bulbs grow, lightly stake the blooms to guide their growth and avoid the flowers toppling over. If you are forcing standard hyacinths, old pantyhose wrapped lightly around the perimeter of the foliage works well to maintain the circular shape of the bulbs in the pot.

9. Now that you have brought your bulbs into full daylight, if they are growing too fast place them in a dark cool spot, even back in your garage. Also for a longer bloom place your bulb pots in a cool spot at night. If your bulbs are not behaving perfectly and are progressing too, slowly for your show date place them in a warm room or under grow lights, but watch these pots carefully! Timing your heat and light is part of the fun of figuring out forcing.

*Editors: Lois Baylis, Helen Ong, and Angela Lineberger*