



What does a Gardener do in the Winter?

Phyllis Heurman, Frederick County Master Gardener

I have finished putting my garden to bed for the winter. I have cut back and mulched plants, caged young trees and shrubs against hungry winter animals, raked leaves, cleaned out my rain barrels, tidied my compost bins and cleaned and oiled my tools. What will I do to feed my gardening needs in the winter?

After the holidays, the house can look gloomy during the grey winter days. I warm up my home by forcing flowers into bloom. January is a good time to purchase at half-price the Amaryllis and Paperwhite Narcissus bulbs that did not sell over the holidays. They will still flourish. Amaryllis bulbs, which are about the size of a grapefruit, grow best in tight quarters. The pot should be about one inch wider than the bulb and have a drainage hole in the bottom. Fill the pot about half full; put the bulb in and fill with additional soil. Pack the soil firmly as Amaryllis can be top heavy. The top one-third of the bulb should be exposed. Water the bulb well after planting, but do not allow the soil to remain soggy. Place the pot in a bright window and water only when the soil feels dry. Amaryllis typically bloom 6 to 8 weeks after you plant them.

Paperwhite Narcissus can be forced in soil or in water. They take only about 4 weeks from planting time to full bloom. To plant Narcissus in soil, simply fill a shallow pot with soil, place the bulbs in it close together, and partially cover the bulbs with soil. About one-fourth to one-third of the bulb should be exposed. Water the bulbs and place the pot in a sunny window. Keep the soil moist but not soggy. Once in bloom, the flowers will last longer if you keep the plants in indirect or filtered light. A cool room at night will also prolong bloom.

Narcissus make very interesting displays if you grow them in a clear vase, in water. Simply place about 3 inches of gravel in the bottom of the vase and place the bulbs close together on top. Fill vase with water to just touch the bottom of the bulbs. Within a couple of days you will see roots begin to develop. You will have to add a little water each day to keep the water touching the base of the bulb. The roots will form a very interesting display as they entwine themselves among the pebbles.

Another way to bring flowers into your home during the winter is to force branches of flowering trees and shrubs. February is a good time to start doing this. After you have cut branches fill a sink with very warm water. Holding the stems under water, recut them at a sharp angle an inch or two above the original cut. Then put the branches in a vase of temperate water with floral preservative in it. Watch the buds slowly swell and spring into bloom. To keep the branches fresh, change the water when it discolors. Also keep the branches away from bright, direct sunlight and direct heat. Good candidates for forcing are ornamental cherry trees, Forsythias, Fothergilla, Bradford Pears, Redbud trees, Lilacs, Quinces, Magnolias and of course, Pussywillows.

Aside from keeping my home bright with live flowers, I spend my winter poring over the garden magazines and books I did not have time to read during the summer, and reviewing catalogs to place orders for new plants I want for the spring.

For more information about horticulture or the Master Gardener Program in Frederick County, call the Frederick County Office of the Maryland Cooperative Extension, 301-600-1596, or visit <http://www.frederick.umd.edu/>. Our mission is to educate Maryland residents about safe, effective and sustainable horticultural practices that build healthy gardens, landscapes and communities.