

KPOV – *The Point*
Gardening: Get Good At It
“Forcing Paperwhite Narcissus”
November 27, 2018

At this time of the year, many gardeners are thinking about “forcing” bulbs for holiday and winter decoration. Bringing a bit of spring into our short winter days requires only a little planning, and brings a smile to everyone’s faces. To “force” a bulb means to imitate environmental factors that trick a bulb into flowering early. Many bulbs that are forced require a period of cold to bloom, but paper white narcissus are chosen for forcing because they don’t require this period of cold to bloom and are easy to force. They also begin rooting quickly, and open within 2-3 weeks of planting. However, one downside of paper whites when forced is they often get too “leggy” and fall over, requiring staking, and detracting from their beauty. The flower bulb research project at Cornell University has come up with a method to keep the stems of the paper white shorter and more attractive. It uses dilute alcohol to cause shortening of the stems. I like to call this method “pickling” your paper whites.

To start, select large, healthy, firm bulbs. They are available now at nurseries. Then select a container for growing your paper whites. I like to use a clear glass container filled part way with colorful stones, but soil can be used as well. Nest the base of the bulb in the stones with the tops up, making sure that the bulb is well supported by the stones, or if you choose, the soil. Water well, filling the container so that the bottoms of the bulbs are just touching the water. If using soil, keep it damp, not soaking wet. Place the planted bulbs in a cool, dark location to encourage root growth. When the shoots reach a height of 2- 3 inches, move the plants to a sunny window with a temperature of 60 to 70 degrees.

Now’s the time to begin watering with the alcohol solution. Carefully pour out the old water and begin using the “solution”. Use any type of clear distilled spirits or alcohol, for example, gin or vodka. Beer or wine should not be used because of the sugars they contain. The dilution used is 4-6%. I shoot for 5%. So how do I figure the formula to use? If the alcohol you select is 40 proof (that is 40%), then to get a 5% dilution, divide 40 by 5 equals 8. So, I will need an eight-fold dilution to yield 5% alcohol, so I will use 1-part alcohol to 7 parts water, or one quarter cup alcohol to one and three quarters water. If using rubbing alcohol that is 70 proof - 70 divided by 5 is 14, use one-part alcohol to 13 parts water to get the 5% dilution. Simply use this dilution in place of water to irrigate the bulbs. Don’t use a dilution of more than 10%, as this will be toxic to the plant. The reason this works is not completely clear, but is probably due to water stress. The alcohol prevents the uptake of water by the bulb, producing a shorter stem but not affecting the flower. After forcing a paper white, the bulb will not bloom again and should be disposed of.

To increase bloom time, as with most flowers, warm temperatures can cause paper white blossoms to fade faster. Move them to a cooler room at night to keep their blooms longer. You can do successive planting of the bulbs to have a continuous feeling of spring through the cold winter.

That’s it for today’s Gardening: Get Good at It with the OSU Extension Service Master Gardeners. For more information or questions about gardening or to contact a Master Gardener,

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