

PICTURE PERFECT PAPERWHITES – THE EASIEST BULBS TO FORCE

With the Holiday Season close by, the stores are beginning to stock various plant bulbs suitable for forcing colorful and sometimes fragrant blooms. Besides the amaryllis, the paperwhite narcissus is perhaps one of the easiest and most rewarding forcing bulbs that gardeners and non-gardeners alike can successfully grow. Very quick to bloom, the paperwhite is a horticultural must for this time of year.

The paperwhite narcissus is a daffodil relative with short, cup-like flowers that originated in the Mediterranean region. Unlike other “bulbs”, the paper white narcissus does not need any pre-chilling in order to flower. Also, if you want to, our subtropical climate will accommodate these perennial bulbs if planted in the landscape after forcing in pots. There are several cultivars to choose from although unless you purchase bulbs through mail order, you will have to make do with what variety the local market supplies. ‘Ziva’ is an all-white variety that can be forced from September through December. Another cultivar, ‘Galilee’ is white and cream and can be successfully forced from December to February.



Both of these cultivars have a heavy fragrance. ‘Avalanche’ is a type with white petals and a yellow central cup. Additionally, there are ‘Constantinopol’ noted for a flower with semi-double white petals and a yellow cup, and ‘Omri’ which produces an all-white flower.

Forcing these bulbs is easy. Choose good, solid, clean bulbs available at most garden centers. Sometimes you can buy them as a complete kit with bulbs, potting medium and even a pot all ready to go. Otherwise, use three to five bulbs per pot depending on the pot or container size. Containers can range from one-gallon pots to ceramic or glass dishes. The potting medium can be anything from pebbles to marbles or a peat and perlite mix. You just need something deep and wide enough to stabilize the roots. Place the bulbs into the potting medium so that half of the

(Continued on page 2)

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narcissus bulb is exposed above the medium. Water the bulbs in accordingly depending on drainage issues. In decorative containers with no drainage, add just enough water to reach the base of the bulbs where the roots will develop. Add water later as needed, but never over water as rots can develop. Place the prepared potted containers in a partial shade location. Keep the planted bulbs evenly moist, but not wet. As the bulbs sprout, you will notice that the water taken up by the plants will increase. Keep the potted bulbs in a relatively “cool”, partial shade location for best growth and flowering. Full flowering can be expected in about four to eight weeks. Give the paper whites as much light as possible to keep the flowers and leaves from stretching out

too much due to low light conditions, but not so much that overheating and flower deterioration occurs.

After you have enjoyed the blooms, take your paperwhite bulb clusters and plant them in a well-drained, sunny site at six to eight inches deep for future blooms in years to come. It may take a few years for these forced bulbs to recover enough to flower in the landscape, and they are not suitable for re-forcing in pots next year with any satisfactory results.

Resources:

- Garofalo, J. (2002) *Paperwhite Narcissus... A potential nursery crop for South Florida*. Miami-Dade County UF/IFAS Extension Service.
- DeHertogh, A.A. (1998) *Home Forcing of Potted Paperwhite (Narcissus)*. North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service.

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You can also visit them at one of our many

Plant Clinics around the county:

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