

By Kylee Baumle

Holidays are over, real winter has set in and it doesn't take long before I tire of it. I look wistfully through my pictures of the garden that were taken in warmer days, at the daffodils, the irises, the Black-eyed Susans. I remember how the sun felt on my face and how I would shut my eyes and attempt to commit that feeling to memory, so that I could conjure it up on the coldest days of the winter season yet to come.

It doesn't work (it never does) but I will keep doing it, hoping one day I really can feel the stored memory. Hope springs eternal. Now if spring would just do the same! But, there are other winter-defying tricks I've got up my sleeve.

It's the perfect time for forcing bulbs. Much has been written about this, the practice of potting up bulbs that are normally planted in the garden in fall, where they await spring before pushing up out of the ground and bringing us that raucous color that makes the wait worth the while.

Many of the spring bulbs need a period of cold or they won't perform, tulips, for example. That's why people in the south can't grow many spring bulbs the way we can; it's just too warm. They can put them in the refrigerator for an 8- to 14-week period of chilling if they want to go to the bother. But, there are other bulbs that don't need this.

The most common of those that don't need a chilling period are paperwhites (*Narcissus tazetta*). You can find these in the garden centers of home improvement stores about now. To pot them up, you can put them in a container with no drainage holes that has a couple of inches of gravel in the bottom, using a little more gravel around the bottoms of the bulbs to help stabilize them. It's best if you crowd the bulbs in the container so that there's no space between them. Add just enough water to touch the very bottoms of the bulbs – no more! Wet bulbs will rot.

You can also use seed-starting mix (not potting mix or regular soil) in a pot with drainage holes. Put about three inches of the mix in the container and plant the bulbs so that just the tips show. Water well, but don't water again until you see signs of growth. From that point on, only water when the top inch of the mix is dry, to avoid that rotting issue.

If you've ever forced paperwhites before, you know that they can get very tall and by the time they bloom, they're falling over.

Want to know a dirty little secret about paperwhites? Alcohol stunts their growth. That's right. Add some rubbing alcohol to the water (for 70% rubbing alcohol, use 1 part alcohol to 10 parts water) and they won't get as tall. The percentage of alcohol needs to be less than 10% (5-7% is preferable) for the plants to bloom normally.

You can use hard liquor, too (tequila, vodka, whiskey, etc.), but no beer or wine, because those contain too much sugar. Remember that hard liquor is most often measured in "proof," which is not the same as percentage. Divide proof by half to find the percentage and dilute with water if necessary to meet the 5-7% range.

Simpler forcing fun can be had in February or March by cutting branches of certain shrubs from your garden. Forsythia, pussy willows, and Eastern redbuds are the most commonly forced branches, but any tree or shrub that's a spring bloomer will do.

On a day when the temperatures are above freezing, cut branches 18-24 inches long, and soak them in warm water overnight to aid in bringing them to bloom. Place them in a vase of water after removing the lower buds that will be underwater.

Once they're finished blooming, you may notice some leaves emerging. Keep them in the water long enough and they may form roots. You can then plant them out in spring and grow more shrubs or trees!

Read Kylee's blog, Our Little Acre, at [www.ourlittleacre.com](http://www.ourlittleacre.com) and on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/OurLittleAcre](http://www.facebook.com/OurLittleAcre). Contact her at [PauldingProgressGardener@gmail.com](mailto:PauldingProgressGardener@gmail.com).

## Forcing the issue of spring

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