Friday’s Feature
By
Theresa Friday
December 20, 2009

For a breath of spring in the depths of winter, try paperwhite narcissus

When the winter weather turns cold and gray, there’s nothing like flowers to brighten up your day. While there are a variety of spring-flowering bulbs that can be grown in containers for indoor display, paperwhites are perhaps one of the easiest bulb to “force” inside.

Forcing a bulb simply means that you entice it to flower outside of its normal blooming season.

While most spring-flowering bulbs require chilling prior to flowering, paperwhite bulbs don’t need chilling, making this the perfect plant for the younger or less experienced gardener.

The paperwhite narcissus is a daffodil relative with short, cup-like flowers that originated in the Mediterranean region. Narcissus is the Latin or botanical name for all daffodils, just as Ilex is for hollies. To the daffodil fancier, paperwhites are called the "polyanthus group" -- literally "many flowers."

Bulbs produce clusters of small white, yellow or orange flowers on 12- to 18-inch tall stems. What paperwhites lack in size, they make up for in fragrance and charm. They are extremely fragrant and their
scent can fill a room. The white flowered type has a very strong, almost overwhelming scent. The yellow flowered types smell very sweet.

Bulbs are usually available in stores in November and December. Buy several and start a group each week to extend the time of blooming. To reduce the possibility of encountering problems from basal rot, purchase bulbs that are free of blemishes and firm to the touch.

**Growing in Soil**

A potting mix for paperwhites does not need to be especially rich but should be well drained. Anything from a clay pot to a fancy ceramic container will do to hold the medium, as long as it's 3 to 5 inches deep and has holes in the bottom for drainage.

Plant the bulbs with their pointed ends up. Plant enough bulbs in the pot to fill it without the bulbs touching each other and make sure the tips of the bulbs are exposed.

Keep the pot in a sunny, cool location – preferably outside. Grown too warm or with too little light, the leaves and flower stalks will be tall and tend flop over. This frequently occurs when people try to grow paperwhites in a warm room indoors on a windowsill. Bring the pot inside on those nights when freezing temperatures are predicted. When the first flower buds open, move the pot indoors to enjoy the fragrance (but realize that some people find the smell overpowering).
Growing in Pebbles

Paperwhites may also be grown in decorative containers filled with pebbles. Choose a shallow, decorative bowl and fill it half full of gravel, pebbles or marble chips. Place the bulbs on the surface and add enough rocks so that the bulbs are two-thirds covered. Add enough water to touch the bottom of the bulbs, and maintain the water at this level. From this point, treat the bulbs the same as you would for potted bulbs.

So brighten up gray winter days by forcing some paperwhites indoor.

Theresa Friday is the Environmental Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

For additional information on County Extension Services and other articles of interest go to http://santarosa.ifas.ufl.edu.

###