

episode 39 show notes and advice

This episode is all about bulbs to plant now to give us lovely things to look at from Christmas and early in the New Year.

Forcing bulbs indoors is a great way to provide lots of colour and scent over the winter months, until things start emerging in the garden in February.

Planting these bulbs guarantees wonderment for January and February and, if you get going soon, you will have flowers for Christmas.

Focusing on narcissi, amaryllis and hyacinths, this week Sarah and Arthur discuss their favourite varieties and offer advice on when, where and how to force your bulbs for maximum impact.

In this episode, discover:

- What 'forcing' means and why it is a good job to do now in time for Christmas and the New Year
- Sarah and Arthur share their favourite varieties of amaryllis, hyacinth and narcissi
- Quick guides to the best way to force each bulb and which materials to use
- How to support top-heavy amaryllis and hyacinths using lichen covered hawthorn branches, creating living sculptures
- Borrowing from nature to top-dress pots using moss and leaves
- Instructions on how to create a narcissi tiered wedding cake table arrangement – a Raven family Christmas tradition

Links & references:

Order Sarah's new book: <https://bit.ly/2TWHJcz>

Order Arthur's new book: <https://bit.ly/3xOov7H>

Shop on the Sarah Raven Website: <http://bit.ly/3jvbaeu>

Get in touch: info@sarahraven.com

Follow Sarah: <https://bit.ly/3jDTvBp>

Follow Arthur: <https://bit.ly/3jxSKK5>

Episode 39 advice sheet

Forcing bulbs

Forcing means the bulbs are lifted and put straight into the cold for 4-6 weeks before planting – which tricks it into growing a few weeks early. They think they've had winter and when in the warmth, come into growth as they would in spring. Buying specially prepared forced bulbs means they have already had this treatment and, if planted now, should flower at Christmas or early in the New Year.

Our favourites

Amaryllis

As Arthur says these are the circus clowns of winter, splendid and a little bit crazy. He plants them in a group of 3 in a huge bowl, not as singles. That's how they look their very best.

Plant in a vintage bowl with good support. You need a container with a good weight to balance the huge, heavy flower stems.

- Before planting, rehydrate the fleshy roots in a baking tray of water overnight.
- Plant into the container with a good few inches of grit in the bottom of the pot before you fill with compost.
- Make a hollow to plant them in the compost, in 3's ideally, rather than singles.
- Plant the bulb with 1/4 -1/3 of it showing above the surface of the compost.
- Don't water into the neck of the bulb, as they can easily rot, only water the compost carefully around it.
- To start them into growth, place them somewhere to grow without a temperature swing from hot to cold. Near a radiator is good.
- Plant and then create a supportive nest of chunky branches of e.g., crab apple or hawthorn so they don't collapse once in full flower. Silver birch tends not to be strong enough for support. Or use an amaryllis frame.

- Festoon with fairy lights.

Amaryllis care notes: See Sarah's video on amaryllis planting at

<https://www.sarahraven.com/articles/plant-grow-amaryllis>

Good varieties for forcing

- 'Papillio'

Looks like an exotic butterfly, with a greeny base with strong crimson markings.

- 'Green Star'

Like a gin and tonic, an elderflower cordial green.

- 'Mandela'

Plum pudding, deep crimson red. The darkest of the lot we've trialled and has a crimson wash over the buds, stems and first leaves too. This is a smaller one, which makes it elegant and classy.

Hyacinths

These really do need cold and dark for forcing. Vita Sackville West used to force her hyacinths under the bed. The cold means they form good roots before the strain of flowering.

The easiest way to grow them is into a bowl of compost, almost the whole bulb buried with just the nose poking out.

Top-dress with moss (scarified from your lawn with a springbok rake) and maybe some dried, strongly shaped leaves such as oak, or sweet chestnut or bracken.

Good varieties for forcing

Sarah and Arthur both like old hyacinth bulbs, as their flower spikes are smaller with the individual flowers more spread out on the stem

- 'Anastasia'

Delicate blue one which naturalises brilliantly in the garden.

- 'Multiflora White'

This gives you lots of flower spikes from one bulb which are more delicate and the flowers are more widely spaced.

- 'Woodstock'

Beautiful beetroot purple.

Narcissus

Good varieties for forcing

- 'Paperwhite'

The classic pure white, multi-headed flowers, and scent which some people love and others hate! Not hardy so you can't plant these out in the garden after flowering.

- 'Sol D'or'

Brilliant yellow and orange with great scent, Also multi-headed with good perfume.

- 'Avalanche'

This is a multi-headed variety bred for cut flower trade in the Scilly Isles. This is a hardy variety so you can plant them in the garden once they've flowered in the winter and they'll flower well next year.

- 'Cragford'

Ivory skirt with an orange nose, and delicious perfume. Another hardy one which we have drifts of now in our hen run — and the chickens don't eat them.

The tiered wedding cake of narcissus – A Raven family tradition

This is the most successful, long-lived Christmas table centre I have ever made: a great tiered fountain of scented Narcissi 'Paperwhites'. Kept cool in my greenhouse, it looked good for nearly a month.

Most narcissus varieties take 16–18 weeks from planting to flowering, but not 'Paperwhite'. These, I've found, need only 6–8 weeks in my frost-free but cold polytunnel (or 4–6 weeks somewhere a little warmer at about 10–15°C). Narcissi do not require a period in the dark to force them, and if you don't get round to planting them yourself, you can buy pots of

them at the last minute. With buds already formed, they will come into flower reliably within a week or two in the warm.

There are several other 'Tazetta' varieties which, if you get on with planting them in late summer and bring them into the warm house about three weeks before Christmas, will be in flower by then too. I force 'Erlicheer', 'Avalanche' and 'Silver Chimes'. All these need a spell in the cold to flower well, at a temperature below 10°C.

If you don't have the room for a 'Paperwhite' arrangement like this, still make a few pots with seven or eight bulbs in each to scatter round the house. You can do these in glass containers full of pebbles and water, with no compost. This alternative looks modern and crisp.

What you'll need

- 2 pots of decreasing size (see below)
- 20-30 Narcissus 'Paperwhite' bulbs – depending on pot size (see below)
- Planting medium – two-thirds soil-based compost, one-third grit, or bulb fibre
- Bunch of silver birch or hazel twigs, 1m long
- Silver and clear glass baubles, and candles, to decorate
- Crocks and a very large platter

You will need as large a pot or bowl as you can fit in the middle of your table to form the base of the arrangement (mine is huge – 60cm wide at the top x 20cm deep), with a smaller one stacked on top. Narcissus bulbs are large, with an extensive root structure, so deep pots are ideal.

You can plant the bulbs in plastic pots, three to a pot (or buy them already planted), and then move them into your final table centre as they come into flower, or plant them straight into their final pots from the start.

Plant the bulbs just below the soil surface, about 2.5cm apart, into a soil-based compost lightened with some grit, with crocks at the bottom of the pot (or use bulb fibre). Store them somewhere cold, at a temperature below 10°C. Keep the compost moist, but not dripping wet.

Once the bulbs really start to shoot, with leaves up to 20–25cm, bring them into the warm. If they're still in plastic pots, transfer them into your final pots. (Place a large platter underneath the largest pot.) Add the bulbs to the pots layer by layer, packing them in as thickly as you can with more of the planting medium.

If you've planted them straight into the final pots, then just assemble them at the table. Poke in a handful of silver birch or hazel twigs around the bulbs in every layer to support them. This looks lovely and staves off collapse. Water as and when the compost begins to dry out.

As a final touch, hang silver and clear glass baubles on the twigs and surround the whole thing with a halo of candles on the table. With this on your Christmas dining table, who needs a Christmas tree?

Once it's all over, bear in mind that Narcissus 'Paperwhite' are not hardy. But don't chuck them: store them. When they've finished flowering, leave them in their pots for the following year, or dry them off, leaving the leaves to shrivel on the bulb, and re-pot them again late next year. I've had the same 'Paperwhite' bulbs flowering every winter for the past 3 years.

For other Sarah Raven Narcissus 'Paperwhite' table centrepieces:

<https://www.sarahraven.com/articles/narcissus-paperwhite-table-centrepiece>

For advice on how to force other indoor bulbs like iris and anemone:

<https://www.sarahraven.com/articles/forcing-bulbs-indoors>