

episode 90 show notes and advice

Episode description

This week, Sarah chats to returning guest and Head Gardener at West Dean Gardens, Tom Brown, about the art of forcing bulbs indoors.

A fount of knowledge and a truly systematic thinker, Tom's expertise is epitomised by the variety of plants and flowers cultivated within West Dean's great Victorian 'glasshouses' which he oversees.

The glasshouses are also famed for their incredible standard of trained fruit, which covers the back walls of the gardens.

In this podcast, Sarah and Tom share their tips on forcing bulbs indoors, tricks for extending flowering times, exciting plant trial plans, and much more.

In this episode, discover:

- The wonderful world of hyacinths
- Experiments with amaryllis bulbs
- Gorgeous centrepiece ideas for your Christmas table
- Exotic plants that make a statement
- Upcoming trials at West Dean Gardens

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Sarah's tips for forcing hyacinth bulbs (4:40)

Inspired by author and garden-designer, Vita Sackville-West, and her abundant garden at Sissinghurst, Sarah's method rests on controlling temperature to force the bulbs into flower.

To make this happen:

- Put the bulb somewhere cold, like the fridge, and leave it there for 6 weeks
- Next, pot them and bring into the house for long enough to break their dormancy – ideal places include under the bed, beneath the stairs, or anywhere totally dark
- The bulbs are then fooled into thinking it's spring and begin to grow due to the warmth of the house - a great trick

Tom's method for bringing hyacinths into flower (6:25)

This method should bring the bulbs into flower 4-6 weeks early

- Tom chooses to pot the bulbs individually before planting in larger groups, to ensure the bulb is capable of producing a bud, and so the display is as full as possible
- He follows on by placing netting and forcing frames over the dormant bulbs for a couple of months and storing in darkness
- Tom explains that the key to success is in the 'dark period' which enables the bulbs to grow strong and healthy roots

Another tip for forcing hyacinth bulbs (8:25)

- Another great trick Sarah learned from Tom starts with planting individual hyacinth bulbs in 9cm pots
- This is an essential step to ensure roots form and that the bulb that will ultimately produce a flower. Remember – one dire bulb could ruin the whole display, so this is a great approach to reduce the risk
- When the bulbs begin to form flower spikes, or there's bullet-like green protuberance coming from the bulb, it's the right time to pot your perfect display – saves heartache and wasted time

Tips from West Dean: hold back on the water (9:05)

Many gardeners are guilty of over-watering. So, remember, less is definitely more when it comes to nurturing bulbs.

- Over-watering can cause the bulb to rot which takes the form of nasty mould in the apex of the plant, visible as the crown begins to push up
- Don't forget that at the beginning or end of the season, when the growth rate is low, the plants won't have the ability to deal with excess water. Be sure to watch out for botrytis and rot
- Don't water the plant when it's in flower, as this can cause the florets to go brown

Top tips for a decadent hyacinth display (12:40)

- Tom likes to display two-toned blue, white, and cream hyacinth varieties in huge terracotta pots for maximum impact
- Sarah chooses to replant the forced bulbs in the cutting garden. The look is more naturalistic due to the sparer flowers and air between

Tips for experimenting with amaryllis bulbs (17:35)

Sarah and Tom share tips for getting the best from amaryllis bulbs

- Tom experiments to improve flowering time, reinforcing how temperature-sensitive amaryllis bulbs can be. He adds - if you're looking to display amaryllis over Christmas time, bringing them into a cooler environment means they might take their time to flower, but it's worth it in the end
- Sarah shares that bringing an amaryllis into flower over a shelf over a radiator, without a draft, is a truly effective way to bring them along. Although, be careful not to water even if they seem dormant
- If you're growing a tall cultivar, a pot can provide ballast. Tom recommends purchasing metal amaryllis stakes, to support the stem
- Don't be tempted to chuck the bulb out after Christmas time. Every year you keep the bulb, it will put on two fingers breadth on the circumference, so after two years, it will produce a whole new flowering spike, and each spike will have one more flowering head