

Paperwhites

Extremely fragrant, paperwhites are a type of non-hardy narcissus related to daffodils. They are available in fall, ready to be planted for the holiday season. Beautiful as they are, when your paperwhites have finished blooming they should be discarded as they will not come back the following year.

Paperwhites will bloom 4-6 weeks after planting, depending on daylength and temperature. Plant the bulbs in the same season as they are purchased-they will not keep for next year.

Potting

Paperwhites can be grown in soil like any other bulb, or can be "planted" in pebbles.

Potting in soil

Choose a pot that will hold your selected number of bulbs. They can be planted quite close together. Plant the bulbs so the pointy "nose" of the bulb and about 1/3 of the top of the bulb is showing. Water thoroughly, and allow to drain well. While growing, keep the soil just barely moist. *Place in a cool (55-65 degrees), bright place for a week to stimulate roots, then move to a warmer (70 degrees) sunny place to encourage leaves. Turn the pot every day or two once leaves show so the plant doesn't lean towards the light. Fertilizer is not necessary for paperwhites.

Potting in pebbles

You can use any type of natural or glass pebble for this. You will also need a water-tight container. If you plan on staking your paperwhites, use a container at least 6" deep. Or you can choose a tall glass vase that will support the leaves and flower stems. Place a layer of pebbles on the bottom of the container approximately 2" deep, then place the bulbs. Add more pebbles until only 1/3 of the bulb remains visible. Add water until it just touches the bottom of the bulbs. This is the water level you want to maintain. Follow the instructions from * above.

Forcing in water

Specially-designed vases can be found that have a molded ledge that holds the bulb just above the water. To use, simply set the bulb in the vase and add water until it just touches the bottom of the bulb. This is the water level you want to maintain. Follow the instructions from * above.

Light & Temperature

Once buds are visible, the cooler you can keep the plants the longer they will last. They tolerate temperatures down to 35 degrees without damage. Moving them out of direct sunlight after buds are visible will also prolong bloom.

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Staking & Support

Paperwhites grown indoors often need support. You can tie a pretty ribbon around the leaves and stems, or use sticks and twine. Pushing some well branched twigs into the soil or pebbles when the leaves are about 6" tall will also work. Choose twigs that are about 12-15" tall.

The Alcohol Trick

Recent research has shown that when paperwhite bulbs are watered with a 5% solution of alcohol, they will be one-half to one-third shorter (with the same size flowers) and less prone to "flopping". Use plain water immediately after planting, but switch to watering with the alcohol solution when leaves are 1-2" tall. **Be careful not to use too much alcohol, as it can be toxic to the paperwhites in high doses.**

Begin watering with a dilute solution of alcohol when shoots are about one to two inches above the top of the bulbs. Rubbing alcohol and distilled spirits such as gin, vodka, whiskey, rum and tequila are all fine—and use the cheap stuff here! Beer and wine are not appropriate because of the sugars they contain. To determine the correct dilute solution, take the percentage of alcohol on the label and divide by five.

Example 1: A bottle of gin is labeled 40 percent alcohol. $40 \div 5 = 8$. I need an 8-fold dilution to yield 5 percent alcohol, so I will mix my solution 7 parts water to 1 part gin.

Example 2: Rubbing alcohol is 70 percent alcohol. $70 \div 5 = 14$. I need a 14-fold dilution to yield 5 percent alcohol, so I will mix 13 parts water to 1 part rubbing alcohol.

