

Yard and Garden – 11-09-2013 – Ted Griess/Extension Horticulture Assistant

Although Valentine's Day is fourteen weeks off, this past weekend I made preparations for that special day. I just finished planting red tulip bulbs.

Knowing this, one might question why. Every beginning gardener knows that on Valentine's Day, February 14th, it is still winter. No tulips bloom outdoors in Central Nebraska on Valentine's Day.

I agree with that statement. Allow me to me clarify. I didn't plant tulip bulbs outdoors. I planted tulip bulbs indoors. My goal is to have red tulips blooming indoors on Valentine's Day using a procedure called forcing.

Forcing involves the manipulation of temperature and light conditions to simulate the period of cold needed by bulbs for their winter rest period, and then coaxing them to awaken earlier than they normally would. All that is needed are bulbs, pots, potting soil, a cold (not freezing) environment and patience.



Hardy bulbs, such as tulips, hyacinth, daffodils, grape hyacinth and crocus, are the easiest to force bloom indoors. Currently, these bulbs are readily available. No matter which bulbs are selected, it is imperative they are fresh, firm, healthy bulbs. If the bulbs cannot be planted immediately, they can be stored in a refrigerator at 35° to 55° F. for several weeks. One word of caution, avoid storing bulbs in the same area as ripening fruits or vegetables. These items give off ethylene gas which can harm the bulbs.

Most any container will suffice. Keep in mind, the bulb size to some degree dictates the size of the pot. A simple rule of thumb is to select a pot that is at least twice as deep as the bulb is tall plus a couple more inches.

Use commercial potting soil instead common garden soil. Commercial potting soil is well-drained, retains adequate moisture and is free of harmful microorganisms. There is no need to add fertilizer to the soil. Actually, a bulb

contains its own food for the growing plant. To get the most from each container, plant as many bulbs as will fit without touching one another or touching the sides of the flowerpot. Before planting the bulbs, add two inches of potting soil to the bottom of the pot. Tulips and daffodils can be planted with the tips of the bulbs showing, however, smaller bulbs such as crocus and grape hyacinth should be completely covered.

When planting tulip bulbs, face the flat side of the bulb toward the pot. The



first and lowest leaf of a tulip is formed from the flat side of the bulb. Such placement will result in having the lowest leaves arch over the rim of the pot helping to create an attractive appearance.

After setting the bulbs, fill the pot with soil to within one-half inch of the rim. This allows room for watering. Avoid packing the soil. Thoroughly water the container until it drips

from the drainage holes. Before placing the entire pot into cold storage, make sure it is labeled— noting the name of the cultivar and the date planted. Also, mark the calendar as a reminder of when the potted bulbs are ready to come out of cold storage.



The optimum time frame for bulbs to be held in cold storage is twelve to sixteen weeks. Keep in mind, if the bulbs were held in a refrigerator more than three weeks before planting, one could subtract three weeks from the required cooling time. Keep the container in complete darkness during cold storage. As long as temperatures can be held at 35° to 45° F., one can use a refrigerator, garage, basement or root cellar for storage. As I stated before, avoid storing bulbs in the same area as ripening fruit or vegetables. Make certain the bulbs are not exposed to freezing temperatures.

Inspect the container periodically for moisture. After twelve to fourteen weeks in cold storage, most bulbs will have developed a good root system and should be ready to begin flowering. Place the rooted pot in a dark, 60°F environment for about a week. Next transfer the container to a sunlit room in the home with temperatures 65° to 70° F. The plants should be blooming in a couple weeks.

My bulbs planted are now tucked away in the fridge for their long winter's nap. With great anticipation I await red tulips on Valentine's Day. Perhaps you, too, might give forcing bulbs a try.