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Forcing Paperwhites

A few spring bulbs can brighten up the darkest winter day, says Sunset Magazine's garden editor Julie Chai. "Blooming paperwhites are great for dressing up your home for the holidays, and they make really beautiful hostess gifts," Julie says. "Paperwhites normally bloom in the spring, but because the bulbs don't require a chill period, you can get them in the fall and force them to bloom ahead of time." Here are Julie's step-by-step instructions for forcing paperwhites:

Materials:

- Decorative stones, from a craft or aquarium supply store
- Glass container, at least 3 inches deep
- Paperwhite bulbs
- Water

Step 1: Place decorative stones in glass container, creating a layer of stones about 1 inch deep. "Paperwhite roots tend to be really vigorous, so be sure your container is at least 3 inches deep in order to give them enough room to grow," Julie says.

Step 2: Gently nestle three or four bulbs on top of stone layer, with pointed end of bulb facing up. Bulbs can be placed almost shoulder to shoulder; the number of bulbs will depend on size of container. "You can buy paperwhite bulbs in packages, but I prefer to buy them loose," Julie says. "That way I can inspect each bulb to make sure they're nice and firm and don't have any mushy or moldy spots."

Step 3: Fill in around bulbs with stones, so that stones cover about two-thirds of height of each bulb. The stones will hold the bulbs in place as they grow.

Step 4: Add water to a depth just touching the bottom of the bulb. "If too much of the bulb is underwater, it may cause the bulb to rot," Julie says.

Step 5: Place container in a cool place, approximately 60 degrees, with bright, indirect light. Check water level daily, adding water as needed to keep water level just at base of bulbs.

After about two weeks, you will see developing roots and beginning foliage.

"Anyone who's ever grown paperwhites knows the foliage is notoriously floppy," Julie says. "To avoid having foliage lying all over your table, you can stunt the growth. After you have a couple of inches of growth, replace water with a water and alcohol mixture, using one part 80 proof alcohol—run, vodka or gin will work—to seven parts water. Continue watering your paperwhites with that mixture."

