

Winter and Spring Container Gardening

Narcissus

Let's start with forced bulbs in containers to give winter beauty to the home. First, purchase and plant narcissus bulbs as soon as possible. Use a clear container about seven (7) inches tall in order to watch the process. Soil is actually not necessary. The bulbs can be planted in pebbles or gravel. And, no cooling period is required. Move the container to a cool area with direct sunlight until the flowers open, then move to bright, indirect light with the coolest possible temperature. Other bulbs can be force grown in winter, but the paper whites are the quickest and easiest.

Two Keys

The two things all container plants need is soil with good drainage and aeration. If cuttings have been brought in during the winter, put them in small containers with wetted potting soil filled almost to the brim. Only water the plants when dry. In winter, under watering is better than overwatering. Place containers in direct light or indirect light. The soil needs to be light and fluffy and not compacted like garden soil. If a commercial potting soil is used, read carefully to see if it already contains a fertilizer. If it does not, add a slow release fertilizer to the soil before planting the cuttings or use a liquid fertilizer when watering. Too much water going through the pot leaches out all the nutrients. When the cuttings take root, plant them outside when all chances of frost are gone.

Soil Type

Garden soil should not be used in containers. It becomes too compacted for a container, thus offering no aeration for plant roots. It can also be a convenient carrier of bring insects and bacteria. Potting soils for containers can be purchased that are a light and fluffy mix, containing mainly peat moss and perlite. Perlite (those tiny white pearls seen in potting soil) helps provide proper drainage to the soil and also holds moisture for your plants. For a lesser price, homemade potting soil can be made. In a large bucket, mix 50% peat moss, 35% bark and 15% perlite. A small amount of rough construction sand may be added to help with drainage, but do not use fine play sand. Fill the outdoor containers with the mix. Add slow release fertilizer. Water soil thoroughly before adding plantings in Spring. Liquid fertilizer may be needed later. Remember that succulent plants need far less watering than tropical plants. For large pots, it is not necessary to fill the whole container with potting soil since roots do not grow that deep. Fill the bottom with any inexpensive man-made material (e.g. styrofoam, aluminum cans, plastic jugs, etc.) and cover with a porous fiber cloth. Place the commercial or handmade mixture on top of the cloth, filling to almost the brim.

Finally, be sure to change the existing potting soil in the outside containers every year. Last year's plants probably depleted most to all of the nutrients.