

Amaryllis

During the cold winter months, many avid gardeners experience twinges of spring fever. This causes many an otherwise knowledgeable gardener to plant tomatoes outside in February, or their summer bedding plants in early March, knowing that they will have to start all over again when a killing frost wipes them out. But sometimes the urge for gardening can't be controlled. To bring a bit of spring indoors, and help cure your spring fever, nothing will beat the amaryllis. Not only are they one of the showiest flowers around, but they stay in bloom for at least 4-6 weeks.

The amaryllis, or *Hippeastrum*, is a tender bulb plant from tropical America. It produces large, trumpet-shaped flowers, growing as large as eight inches across in clusters of four to six flowers per stem. The leafless, hollow stems can grow to be two to three feet tall. Colors include shades of red, orange, pink as well as white and striped ones.



You can either purchase a pre-packaged bulb already planted in a container, or the bulb by itself. Some nurseries and florists will also sell plants already in bloom, or ready to burst into bloom. Regardless of how you start with it, this is a bulb that will re-bloom every year with proper attention.

If you are starting out with a bulb that hasn't begun to grow, be sure that at least half of the bulb is exposed out of the potting soil. The container should be only slightly larger than the bulb. Water sparingly until growth starts. Excessive watering is harmful and may cause the bulb to rot.

Soon you will see the flower spike begin to start growing out of the center of the bulb. Once growth has begun, move the plant to a sunny location and make sure that it stays moist. Turn the plant frequently to keep it from leaning. Temperatures during the day of 70 - 75 degrees will force the plant into flower earlier, but may also give you extremely tall plants, which will need some staking for support. Once the blooms begin to open, give the plant cooler conditions and move it out of direct sunlight to extend the length of bloom. Your plant should be in bloom within four to six weeks from the time growth begins.

It is normal for the plant to produce a lone flower stalk, with the leaves appearing after bloom. Occasionally you will be lucky and have two flower stalks. Each flower stalk will have a minimum of four blooms, with some of the larger, older bulbs producing up to six flowers per stalk.

Once the flowers have faded, cut the flower stalk back to within several inches of the bulb. The foliage needs to be kept actively growing following flowering to insure a flower for the next season. The deep green, strap-shaped leaves average one and a half inches in width and can grow to be 18 to 24 inches long. Fertilize with any houseplant fertilizer after blooming, and put the plant in a sunny window. When all chances of frost have passed, move the plant outside to a sunny environment. You can sink the pot in the ground to reduce your watering schedule. Make sure that the plant receives at least a half a day of sunlight. Fertilize the plant monthly.

By September, gradually reduce your watering, lift the plant out of the ground and quit fertilizing. With the cooler temperatures, shorter days, and drier conditions, the leaves should begin to fade. Bring the bulb inside, cut off the old foliage and let the bulb rest on its side for a month or two. This resting period will usually end on its own, when you see the bulb beginning to sprout out. Then you start the cycle all over again.

When you begin the cycle again, check to see if the bulb needs to be repotted, or if offsets (small bulbs) need to be removed. Amaryllis will bloom better if slightly potbound, so don't put them in too large of a container. Use a well drained potting soil. If you are removing any offsets, pot them in small three inch pots. They should grow into flowering size within two to three years. Don't leave them attached to the mother bulb, since they will be competing for water, sunlight and nutrients.

Amaryllis can be grown from seed, but it is a somewhat long process. If you want to try it, leave the flowers attached after bloom, to allow for seed production. This will slightly weaken the bulb, so be sure to fertilize well afterwards. Sow the seeds soon after harvesting. In about four weeks the seedlings should be up and growing. When the second set of leaves forms, move them to an individual three inch pot. Keep them in a sunny location, and don't allow the leaves to die down for the first year. Seedlings normally can take up to three to five years to produce their first bloom.

Many people would like to plant their bulbs outdoors for year-round growth. Although, some people have had success with this by mulching the plants heavily, it is preferable to bring them indoors each year. Besides the chance of losing the bulb to a hard winter, you need the color and enjoyment of these flowers indoors during the winter months more than you need it in the garden in the summer. There is a variety of amaryllis that is hardy and will come back each year in the garden.

Compared to the cost of other bulbs, amaryllis bulbs seem to be somewhat pricey. But they are a large bulb, with a large flower and they will re-bloom for you each year. It is not unheard of to have amaryllis bulbs passed down in families from one generation to another. The pre-packaged kits offered at many department stores have brought the price down somewhat. Bulbs may average from \$5 to \$10, while the blooming plants can sell for as high as \$50.

If you want to extend the season of bloom for a long period of time, purchase several bulbs and stagger the planting. This can give you months of beautiful flowers. Whether you've never had an amaryllis before, or you have been growing them for years, amaryllis are a good investment for color and flowers. They also make a great and welcome gift. So pot one up and enjoy!