

# Blooming Christmas presents

Rebekah Panayides

I enjoy giving home-made presents at Christmas but having done the whole jam-chutney-liqueur thing for several years now, I decided it was time for a change and thought I'd try my hand at forcing bulbs. They make great presents - who wouldn't want a pot of colourful, scented flowers to brighten up their windowsills indoors while winter storms rampage outside? And they still have the homemade touch as I will pot them up and grow them on myself.

Having done some research I was really excited to find out that my options weren't restricted to the usual hyacinths or paper white narcissus, but that most dwarf spring bulbs, such as crocuses, *Iris reticulata* and even tulips (the shorter type) would cooperate. So at the beginning of September, armed with the excuse to my other half that they were for Christmas

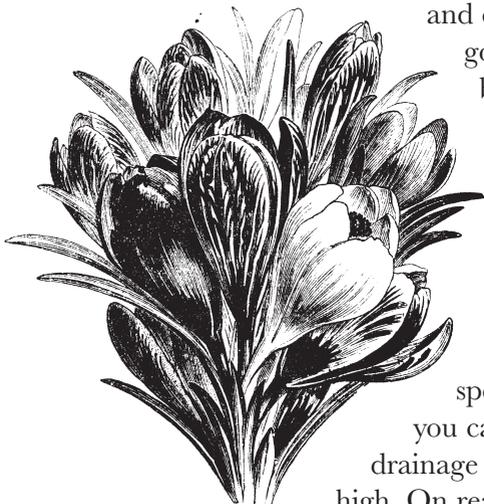
presents, I set about indulging myself, all in a good cause you understand, and ordered a wide range of bulbs.

With the order sent I began to look out for suitable containers to enhance my bulb displays. I scoured the charity shops for bowls and tea



cups (I've seen stylish photographs of muscari packed into these but would it actually work?). I rummaged in my shed for terracotta pots but my best find was two huge wicker baskets, which I managed to 'recycle' from someone else's November 5th bonfire! I also started to save the transparent rectangular plastic fruit punnets, the type you buy strawberries or plums in at the supermarket, as I was beginning to get worried about the size of my over-indulgent order and thought these would hopefully house the extras.

As soon as the bulbs arrived I potted them into their allotted containers. All were planted the same way - a few crocks in the base of the pot and then three-quarters filled with multipurpose compost. The bulbs sat on top of this and then I backfilled so that the top third of the bulb, its nose, was exposed. For any containers without drainage holes, such as tea cups, I used the more expensive bulb fibre. I stuck to one variety per pot and filled the containers as full of bulbs as possible but without them touching. After making sure the compost was moist and pots labelled, I took them down for a spell of solitary confinement in our cold, dark cellar. Of course, you don't need a cellar - just somewhere cold enough to trick the bulbs into thinking winter has arrived and dark enough to allow them to grow a good root system before the shoots and buds develop.



The time they need to spend under these conditions depends on the variety. Generally it is about 10-12 weeks for the likes of hyacinths, around 15 for crocuses, irises or chionodoxa and a few weeks longer for species tulips. They need moving once you can see roots appearing through the drainage holes and the shoots are around 5-7cm high. On reaching this stage I moved mine to our

cool back room to acclimatise - if you move them into the heat too soon, a mistake which I made with some crocuses, they fail to bloom.

Things began to move quickly once they warmed up and the crocuses took only a couple of weeks to come into bloom. Before giving my bulbs away, I torted up the pots using short lengths of red cornus stems from the garden. I tucked both ends into opposite sides of the pots to make a hoop and several of these acted like

mini plant supports (I was surprised at how tall my forced bulbs grew, most needed some form of support). The red of the cornus provided a great contrast colour for the bright yellow and purple crocuses. The hyacinths looked great with more red stems to support them and a mulch of moss or broken slate to cover the soil. Even my plastic punnets looked smart, finished with gingham ribbon wrapped around the container and my greetings message added on an old-fashioned luggage label or piece of slate.

Not all my bulbs were a success; some of my irises never emerged, my muscari were all leaf and not enough flower, and the inevitable pre-Christmas chaos meant a few pots were neglected and quickly dried out. But friends appreciated their presents and, like me, enjoyed being able to study the bulbs close-up and have a bit of garden indoors to fuss over while it was so dark and cold outside. So as I write this in early September I'm busy ordering more bulbs. I'm trying the wood anemone *Anemone blanda* and the florist's variety *Anemone coronaria*; more crocuses as they're such good value, and I'm giving irises another go. And of course, as I've told the other half, these are all for Christmas presents! *Rebekah Panayides gardens in West Sussex.*

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