

MESSENGER-INQUIRER

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Amaryllis Brightens the Day

Seeing a gorgeous flower blooming during dreary cold weather brings a smile and happiness. The large blossom of the amaryllis catches your attention. I still remember my grandmother's amaryllis in bloom sitting on the table during the holiday season. Watching the flower bud emerging from the bulb and producing the huge blooms is fascinating. They are fun to grow and work with to rebloom the next year.

What is so special about the flowers? Three to four large, gorgeous 6- to 8-inch trumpet-like flowers are produced on a flower stalk reaching up to 22 inches tall. Each bloom opens close to the same time. Some bulbs may produce more than one flower stalk.

Common flower colors are red, pink, salmon, rose, deep burgundy, and white. Some flowers have two colors such as pink over white or red stripes on white or a white stripe down the center of the flower on a red background. Double-flowered forms, which look like a flower within a flower, are offered too.

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Care of the amaryllis bulb is fairly simple. The bulb should be dormant when you buy it unless you are buying a flowering plant. Select the largest bulb because the larger the bulb, the bigger the flowers. Make sure the bulb is firm and free from cuts and bruises.

Select a container at least 2 inches wider than the diameter of the bulb to allow 1 inch of soil around the side of the bulb. Amaryllis prefers to grow with little room available. The pot should have a drainage hole, otherwise the bulb may remain too wet and rot.

Amaryllis requires a rich, well-drained soil. Commercial potting mixes work best. When planting the bulb, remove dead or broken roots. Position the bulb so that one-third to one-half of it is above soil level. Make sure soil is filled around fleshy roots, and then water to remove air pockets around the roots. Then water when the soil becomes dry to the touch, otherwise the bulb may rot. Do not let the water accumulate in the saucer beneath the pot.

As soon as the leaves and flower stalk begin to peek out of the bulb, promptly move the plant to a bright location. It may take several weeks before growth begins after planting. There is considerable variation in the time required for flowers to develop. Occasionally, they may bloom in as little as four weeks but more often require six to eight weeks. The flower stalk usually begins to grow first, and the leaves appear later. Rotate the container every few days to keep the flower and foliage from leaning too much toward the light. Support for the flower stalk with a stake may be needed because the flowers are heavy and to keep it upright in a low-light situation. After growth begins, frequent watering is necessary.

After flowering is complete, cut off the stalk back to the top of the bulb to keep the bulb from wasting energy on developing seeds. Then move the plant back to a sunny window until

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spring. If you want the bulb to flower again next winter, it must grow into the spring and summer to restore the bulb's food supply. Apply a water-soluble houseplant fertilizer about every three weeks.

Keep it in the pot. During the summer, keep it well-watered and fertilized to maintain vigor. According to Dr. Rick Durham, University of Kentucky Horticulture Extension Professor, after the danger of frost is past, the plant may be moved outdoors gradually acclimating it to brighter light by placing it under a tree or awning. Move it to brighter light every few days until the plant is in full sun.

In fall, the bulb should be moved indoors before frost. You may notice the leaves beginning to turn yellow in late summer. This is a signal to start withholding water. If the leaves do not turn yellow, avoid watering when you bring it inside. Do not water as leaves dry and the bulb becomes dormant. Remove the dead leaves and store the bulb inside its pot in a dark, cool location.

After a dormant period of about two months, follow the steps above and watch the amaryllis grow again and bloom in the winter.

Repotting the bulb is generally necessary about every three years. It is best to avoid disturbing it until then. If small bulbs have been produced around the main bulb, you can leave them until the main bulb is repotted or remove them right away. Plant each little bulb in a separate pot. It may take three or more years before they are big enough to bloom.

For something different, instead of growing in soilless mix, the amaryllis bulb is sealed in colorful wax. A wire is inserted at the bottom of the bulb in the wax so it will stand up by itself.

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They do not need water and can be placed on the countertop or in a container without soil and water. The flower spike is not as tall since it does not have roots to support it. After the flowers bloom, the bulb is usually thrown away because most of the roots are cut off before the bulb is sealed in the wax.

For more information about growing amaryllis, contact the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service at 270-685-8480 or annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu.

Annette's Tip:

Amaryllis are available at local stores, through catalogs, or online. They make great gifts.

Enjoy the flowers!

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