

2021 is the Year of the Hyacinth

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Few spring flowers are as beloved for their fragrance as hyacinths – pure and lilting yet not overpowering. Jewel-like colors adorn garden beds and fill pots to give as Easter or Mother’s Day gifts or just to bring home to perfume your rooms. Rich blues, purples and pinks are most popular but soft yellows, delicate apricots and creamy whites are also quite enchanting.

One would never suspect it but hyacinths (*Hyacinthus orientalis*) are bulbous members of the asparagus family, native to the eastern Mediterranean region. The genus is comprised of just a small number of species. While asparagus is edible, hyacinths are not. Their bulbs and plant parts contain oxalic acid which can cause serious illness in people or pets if consumed. The positive side of this is that voles, mice, and deer tend to leave hyacinths alone when planted in the garden.

Hyacinths have a long, intriguing history. They were mentioned in Homer’s great epic poem, the *Illiad,* written between the 10th and 8th century BC. Many great Middle Eastern rulers included hyacinths in their royal gardens and most likely the Arabs introduced hyacinths to western Europeans sometime during the 1500s.

The first European illustration of a hyacinth appeared in Dodoens’ *Florum et…Historia* published in 1568. Renown English herbalist, John Gerard, noted growing them in his garden in 1596. Around this time, hyacinths were making their way into Holland, but the Dutch were rather preoccupied with tulips.

It wasn’t until the late 1600s that hyacinths began to be bred in earnest for colors and floral properties. Wild hyacinths had fewer and more widely spaced florets than the tightly clustered racemes that cultivated varieties flaunt. Haarlam florist, Peter Voorhelm, began breeding double hyacinth by about 1684 and his grandson, George, listed 244 doubles and 107 single cultivars in his 1753 treatise. Hyacinths were popular with French royalty leading up to the French Revolution and later treasured by Victorian England. According to the Language of Flowers, blue hyacinths stood for constancy, white for discretion and red for sorrow. At the height of popularity, there were nearly 2000 hyacinth varieties; now we have but several dozen to choose from. Surprisingly, some of the same cultivars developed more than 100 years ago are still sold today.

As far as bulbs go, hyacinths are easy to grow. Give them a sunny, well-drained site with a pH in the 6’s and a moderately fertile soil, and they will provide you with long lasting, heavenly scented blooms usually in April and May. Like most spring flowering bulbs, hyacinths are planted in the fall. Bulbs are planted 4 to 5 inches deep and look best when grouped in odd numbered clusters of 5 or 7 or more.

Hyacinths are versatile bulbs and can be used in foundations plantings, in perennial gardens and shrub borders or alone as bedding plants. Tuck a few bulbs by whatever door or walkway you routinely use so their scent can lift your spirits. They make excellent cut flowers, lasting a couple of weeks indoors in a vase. If you have room, consider planting a row or two in the vegetable garden for your cutting pleasure.

Hyacinths also force well as long as they are given about 10 to 12 weeks of 40 to 45 F temperatures. They can be potted up in the fall and left in the garage or other cool spot where they will not freeze and brought in around the holidays. Those forced in hyacinth glasses can be put in a paper bag in the vegetable keeper in the refrigerator for 10 weeks. Check them every couple of weeks for desiccation. When their time is up, place them in hyacinth glasses with the water level just touching the basal plate of the bulb. Set in a bright spot and watch for leaves and flower buds to appear. Hyacinths forced in glasses cannot be planted in the garden but those in pots can be after the blooms have faded and removed.

Like all spring flowering bulbs, the foliage of the plant needs to grow and ripen and die on its own in order to provide food and energy to send back to the bulb so it will grow and rebloom the next year. Do remove spent flower stalks but leave the foliage until it yellows and turns brown. Then you can cut it off. Plants usually benefit from a light fertilizations when growth appears in the spring.

While your hyacinths will come back year after year, it is true that the blossoms are less abundant, and a bit more widely spaced on the stems than what is seen on first year plants. The plant just loses its hybrid vigor. They still smell luscious though. Offsets form on some cultivars but hyacinths naturalize really slowly. If you want a large display of them, you need to plant a lot of bulbs.

This spring enjoy your hyacinths, whether planted in the ground or purchased as a potted plant. Marvel in their cheerfulness and fragrance and do set those potted plants in the ground after enjoying them and put hyacinths on your list of fall bulbs to plant later this year.

For questions about hyacinths or on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at [www.ladybug.uconn.edu](http://www.ladybug.uconn.edu) or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.

A picture containing ground, outdoor, grass, plant

Description automatically generated

