



## Grow Fragrant Paperwhites

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

An easy to grow bulb available this time of year is paperwhite narcissus. They can be found at garden centers as well as often at your favorite grocery or big box store. Some places sell bulbs singly while others offer you several bulbs in forcing kits. If possible, select your own bulbs looking for large, firm ones with their brown tunics intact and new growth just appearing at the top. While there are several varieties of white narcissus, often the particular cultivar is not noted unless you ordered them from a catalog. There is only one golden yellow variety, 'Soleil d'Or'.

How many to purchase depends on the size of the pot and the size of the bulbs. Typically, 3 to 5 bulbs will fit in a 6-inch, shallow bulb pan or regular plant pot. Part of the fun of growing paperwhites is you can be quite creative when choosing a container to plant them in. The energy the bulb needs to produce leaves and blossoms is in the bulbs – all you need to add is water.



Photo by DMP

Paperwhites can be grown in regular potting mix, much like amaryllis or in water in a container without drainage holes. When growing for my personal enjoyment, I often opt for potting them up in a bulb pan or in just a decorative plant pot with drainage holes. A soilless mix for general houseplants works well as growing media. Fill the pot or bulb pan to within about an inch from the top. Nestle in the bulbs so they are close but not touching and place extra media around them. The top quarter or so of the bulb can stick out of the potting media. Keep the media moist but not saturated.

When grown in water, one can be creative with the type of container being used – everything from a glass or ceramic bowl to a wide mouth vase or any decorative container that holds water. The bulbs would not be placed directly in the water, rather using small half-inch pebbles, glass marbles or beads, colored stones, hydroponic gravel, or any other decorative, non-porous media, they would be set right above the water level. Do not allow water to touch the bulbs, however, as rot may set in.

Clear glass containers let you see the water level as well as root formation, but other watertight containers will do. Whatever non-porous media you choose, fill your container to within one to two inches of the top. Add water until it is just under the top of your media. Then set the paperwhite bulbs so they are close but not touching. Add more pebbles or other media until only the top quarter or so of the bulb is showing.

Next, whether planted in soilless mix or in a non-porous media, like pebbles, place your potted bulbs in a cool, dimly lit space for a couple of weeks so that roots can form. Check the level every other day or so for bulbs being grown in water and refill as necessary. After about two weeks, tug slightly on the bulbs to see if roots are being established. Once roots are noticed, move the containers into a bright spot but keep the temperatures cool (less than 65 F) if possible.



Photo by DMP

Plants will bloom in 3 to 10 weeks depending on the cultivar. Keep the potting medium moist or water level even. Paperwhite bulbs send up 1 to 3 flower stalks, each loaded with 10 to 20 fragrant blossoms.

A common complaint is that stems get elongated and flop over. This is usually due to inadequate light and temperatures that are too warm. Stems can be tied with yarn or corralled with a decorative plant ring. Planting in a tall, wide-mouth vase will keep the flower stalks upright. Or they can be cut and put in water and admired as fragrant cut flowers.

Once the blossoms fade, the bulbs can be composted or otherwise discarded. They will not bloom again. Enjoy the heady scent and lovely blooms while they last. Pot them up for your pleasure or to give as holiday gifts.

If you have questions about growing paperwhites 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.homegarden.cahnr.uconn.edu](http://www.homegarden.cahnr.uconn.edu) or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.