

## Paper White Narcissus (*Narcissus papyraceus*)



Narcissus paperwhites freshly planted and already growing. Photo by Randall Prue

The freshly and powerfully intoxicating scent of paperwhites is one of the most refreshing escapes from our tedious northern winter. Here, a month ahead of the solstice, we see a pot of freshly planted paperwhites and the box from which they eagerly escaped. Each of five boxes that I picked up late November contained five firm bulbs (bulbs should always be firm when we buy them), each with a growing tip bursting to get going.

But wait! Why was that so easy? Why no weeks of chilling? Why no wait? Why no fridge, cold room, root cellar? Because these narcissi hail from the Mediterranean region where they enjoy a mild winter.

It really is that easy to enjoy scent, bloom, and leaf during the bleak northern winter. Inside the package shown, which cost me about \$6.00 (these days, \$6.00 buys one small rooted cutting in a pot).

If you want to enjoy these bulbs again, you need only respect its growth cycle and allow it to enjoy the important feeding and rest phases. After flowering, and like most flowering bulbs (e.g.,

tulips, garlic), the plant continues through a period of growth. During this period, the foliage (the leaves) continues and is feeding the bulb for the next season's blossom. This is the best time to feed (fertilize) the plant. For more on the topic of feeding plants, see the topic "Feeding", beginning on page 21 of [Keeping Them Alive](#) .

Many gardeners report that they have cut down a bulb's leaves after flowering ends. If you do cut down the leaves on narcissus or any other bulb, you might as well dig it up and toss it into the compost. Without the feeding and nutrient storage that takes place during this feeding phase, the bulb will not likely bloom again. Typically, if leaf removal is repeated, the plant slowly deteriorates and dies.

The next phase of the growth cycle of a bulb is rest and relaxation (this applies to all tulips, hippeastrum, garlic, perennial onions, etc.). After the leaves die back, the bulb rests. How long it rests may vary from species to species, but typically the rest period is the length of winter in its native habitat. During the rest cycle, the bulb wants only just enough moisture to prevent it from drying up. The firm bulb contains everything it needs for the next season of growth and flowering. It is not feeding, so any attempt at feeding is pointless. Like hippeastrum (what we call amaryllis), I leave paperwhites in soil in pots, tucked under a table in the sun room, and have enjoyed repeated bloom for several years with many of them.