



Horticulture Notes: *Amaryllis*

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The genus, *Hippeastrum*, contains 80 species and 600 hybrids of large bulb plants. This genus translates in Greek to the "Knight's star lily". Most famous is the bulb we call *Amaryllis* though scientifically, only native bulbs grown in South Africa are truly *Amaryllis*. So much for technicalities. We recognize the winter bulb grown for the holidays as *Amaryllis* and that is the plant to which I refer in this article.

The bulb is composed of many tissue layers. As the outer layer dries, it separates from the bulb much like onion skin does. This dry layer is easily removed for esthetic value. One end of the bulb grows the roots which appear as dry threads; the other end develops 1-4 flower stems and, when flowering is complete, the flat, 10" basal leaves.

Let's imagine you have a bulb. Now what? You can containerize it using pebbles and water or plant it in a soil-based potting soil. Rely on a heavy pot so it does not flop over as the flower stalk grows. These are top-heavy beauties!

Pebbles and water method:

The container needs to be 2" wider than the diameter of the bulb. Fill the pot half full with stones, marbles, or any other non-decomposing material that you want to use. Fill with water until it reaches the pebble surface which should be, at a minimum, 1" below the rim of the container. Do not over-fill as this extra water will rot the roots. Next, place the bulb, root end down on top of the pebbles. The roots will hydrate and grow amongst the pebbles to provide upright stability as the plant develops its top heavy flowering stalks. When flowering is complete, cut the stalk 1/2" from the bulb. Once severed, hold the stalk upside down to dispose of it; it is loaded with juices that will otherwise run up your arm and all over the carpet....

Potting method:

The container needs to be 2" wider than the diameter of the bulb and have a hole for drainage. Fill the pot half full with moistened soil-based potting mix. Place the bulb on top of the soil and add more soil up to the shoulders of the bulb. The top 1/3 of the bulb will be exposed and at a minimum, the top of the bulb should sit 1" below the rim of the container.



Water sparingly until the flower stalk shows 2 of new growth. Once it is actively growing, water regularly. Turn the container by 1/4 turns so that the stalk grows straight.

Regardless of the method you use, place the container in a cool bright area. When flowering has finished and the stalks are removed, place the pot in a bright, sunny window. Water so the soil remains slightly moist. Provide a balanced, liquid fertilizer every two weeks for 3-5 months. As the leaves mature and growth stops, decrease watering.

Caring for the bulb for next year:

After flowering, many owners throw the bulb away. It has used much of the carbohydrates that were stored in the bulb to produce the blooms you just witnessed but it is easy enough to care for this plant in order to produce gorgeous blooms for next year.

Once the outdoor temperatures are above 55 degrees [bring the container inside at night if it is below 55 degrees], place the plant in the sun and fertilize regularly. Again, that means a balanced, liquid fertilizer every two weeks for 3-5 months. In the fall, prior to the first frost, bring the container indoors, trim the leaves to 2" from the top of the bulb, and place it in a dry, dark location for 12 weeks. You want it to go dormant, so do not water it during this timeframe. To re-grow the plant, re-place the old soil, remove dead leaves and the dry "onion-like" layers, and re-plant as before. The plant needs bright light now and a good drink. After the new stalks have grown 2", resume regular watering. You can delay or prolong flowering by decreasing the light and water it receives.

Each bulb produces one or more flower stalks with each stalk producing 4-6 flowers. Each flower is 4-6" wide.

Your bulb might develop off-sets as other bulbs do. Detach these so the mother bulb will grow strong again and store more carbohydrates for the next cycle. Off-sets are small bulblettes that can be grown on their own to increase the number of plants that you have. It takes about 3 years for an off-set to bloom. In the meantime, treat it as you would a larger bulb but with delayed gratification.

