

Tipsy Paperwhites Don't Fall Over

November 5, 2009 by [Hilda Brucker](#) ([Edit](#))

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Photo: Netherlands Flower Bulb Information Center

A friend of mine always says it wouldn't seem like Thanksgiving without a pot of paperwhite narcissus in bloom. There's definitely something magical about flower bulbs in general, but at this time of year, paperwhites become almost staggeringly precious for their ability to grow and bloom indoors. Watching a pot of the bulbs progress from day to day is a deep, private pleasure — from the first plump white roots, to the lengthening stems, fattening buds, and, finally, the creamy white blooms. A vase of cut flowers, no matter how beautiful, can't captivate and engage its audience this way. Not even close.

It's really a misnomer to refer to the process as "forcing" the bulbs, because it's so darn easy, it's almost fool-proof. No need for chilling, because these bulbs are willing! The biggest problem is trying to control the long, leggy stems the bulbs put out when grown indoors. It's just not as much fun when the flowers flop over on the

table, and I know at least one person who's given up on paperwhite bulbs because of this.

I've used a few tricks in the past to encourage compact growth. I've started the bulbs under an adjustable growlight, keeping the lamps just a few inches above the tips of the flower stems and raising it as they grow. I've also planted them in a few inches of pebbles at the bottom of a tall glass container, so the sides of the vase support the stems.

A few years ago, a new method for reining in floppy paperwhite stems was pioneered by Cornell University, that Ivy League bastion of higher learning. I've never tried it myself, but since it involves alcohol, it seems perfect for the holidays. Are you ready? Supply your bulbs with gin on the rocks. Or vodka, or rum, or whiskey, or any other distilled alcohol (i.e. stay away from beer and wine).

Seriously, you can read [Cornell's official report](#) yourself, and it even has photos of the experiment results, but here's a quick recap of it:

- Diluted alcohol stunts the growth of paperwhites, resulting in stems that are 1/3 to 1/2 shorter, with flowers of normal size.
- According to Cornell, you just plant the bulbs in pebbles or marbles and add water as usual. After they put out roots and have top shoots an inch or two tall, pour that water off and replace it with an alcohol solution. The ideal strength is roughly 5%, which you can accomplish by mixing one part of any 40-proof distilled spirit with seven parts of water.
- If you're a teetotaler, you can use 70% rubbing alcohol from the drugstore, but in this case you're going to mix one part alcohol with ten parts water.

And if pouring off the original water seems like too much work, I'm sure you could experiment with adding small amounts of alcohol to the mix — but be aware that at concentrations over 10%, it will be toxic to your plants.

Has anyone tried this? What kind of results did you get? Leave a comment!



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