

'Nagano'



# AMARYLLIS — *Trumpets of Winter*

There's more to this familiar favorite than one might guess and breeders have new successes on the way.

Tovah Martin

GARDENING IS NOT, in general, overburdened by foolproof flowers, but amaryllises are as close as you'll come to foregone conclusions. Tuck an amaryllis in a pot at the proper time of year, and chances are that in eight weeks you'll see big, luscious blossoms —no cold treatment, no fuss, muss, or bother. In the realm of

houseplants, these South American natives are a dream come true.

They're embarrassingly easy, and I wouldn't be without several amaryllises staged about the house, planted in a staggered sequence for a long season of bloom. Because in winter who wouldn't welcome big, bright blossoms the size of dinner plates? There's nothing discreet about an amaryllis, and that's just what we crave in winter.

This particular brand of midwinter drama is a fairly recent affair. The history of hippeastrums in cultiva-

tion is lengthy, but their presence in the trade has been brief. (**Hippeastrum** is the proper botanical name for the plants that we call amaryllis, although botanists ousted them from that genus decades ago.) Like the true amaryllis, *A. belladonna*, hippeastrums are members of the Amaryllidaceae family. Beyond technical botanical differences, hippeastrums differ in their region of origin. *Amaryllis belladonna*, with cheerful red, four-inch-wide, tubular blossoms in late autumn and early winter, is native to South Africa. Hippeastrums, on the other hand, originate in South America, with species scattered through Argentina, Peru, Brazil, Uruguay, and Paraguay.

A handful of *Hippeastrum* species arrived in Europe late in the 17th century, and though they tended to have thinner petals and didn't boast the broad trumpet look that we associate with today's amaryllises, the species' flowers were flamboyant. And for plant breeders, they held great promise.

The first hybrid appeared in about 1799, when an enterprising British watchmaker took *H. reginae* (five-inch-long, bright red flowers) and bred it to *H. vittatum* (striped red-and-white six-inch flowers).

Amaryllis undoubtedly reached the U.S. not long after they arrived in Britain, given that bulbs are able to withstand long journeys intact. It wasn't until the 1930s, however, that they had any presence, commercially speaking. Moreover, until the 1950s their popularity was restricted to the southern U.S., where they were used primarily as bedding plants. They worked well in that capacity, providing color when other bulbs were in a lull.

At some point around the 1950s, someone saw the potential for amaryllises as indoor plants. Breeding for this purpose progressed by fits and starts for quite some time, but 20 years ago hybridizing suddenly became frenzied. As a result, petal and flower size increased substantially, and in the last 10 years the color spectrum has expanded similarly, moving beyond the long-standing palette of white, pink, and red. Not only have oranges and peaches appeared (my favorite is '**Nagano**'), but picotee-edged, striped, streaked, and flowers with throats of contrasting color are also showing up in greater numbers.

According to Cees van der Lip, an amaryllis specialist in the Netherlands, '**Orange Sovereign**' has long

served as the ideal for breeding purposes. The flower stem is long, but not too tall. The bulbs produce leaves at about the same time as the blossoms. The flower spikes are composed of generous trusses of immense, lipstick-red blossoms, and they unfold in time for the holidays. 'Orange Sovereign' boasts other characteristics that we take for granted, such as trusses that blossom in unison rather than unfolding sporadically, one flower at a time.

Although double amaryllises have been on the market for several years, they aren't up to van der Lip's standards yet—the blossom trusses don't open together, and the flower spikes are reduced. The best to date, he thinks, is '**Double Sweet Surrender**'. But there is still much work to be done.

All sorts of shortcomings can be tolerated if the bulb is punctual in flowering. On their normal schedule, amaryllises grow for eight to nine months after flowering, typically slipping into dormancy in September. They then require a nine- to ten-week dormancy period before beginning the cycle again. In Holland, where amaryllises have traditionally been hybridized and grown, the October harvest makes it difficult to produce flowers by the holidays. That's why South African



'Apple Blossom'

## Bigger is Better

To be successful with amaryllis one should purchase the biggest possible bulbs—as large as a big man's fist, say 12 inches in circumference or more—so that it will produce 2 or more scapes. It is best to pot the bulbs in rich soil in pottery that isn't more than an inch larger, all around, than the bulb, for roots should be pot-bound. Incidentally, return any bulb to the supplier if it doesn't have a good supply of fleshy roots. Use bottom heat to get the bulb started—the top of a radiator with a thick copy of *Time* as an insulator. Its spectacular flowers appear in January or February and each one keeps a week or more in a cool location.



'Red Lion'

### Forcing Jars

Like hyacinths, amaryllises can be forced in jars, if the bulb is balanced just above, but not touching, the water.

hybrid amaryllises are suddenly showing up in significant numbers. In the future, such names as 'Miracle', 'Candy Floss', 'Carnival', and 'Blushing Bride' will be on the tip of everyone's tongue. Indeed, if South African-grown amaryllises can be effectively harvested in summer, we might someday see amaryllises blooming on the windowsill for Halloween.

There's another solution to this desire for early blooming plants: smaller flowering types, which tend to bloom more rapidly than their outsize kin. This explains the downsizing of a flower that everyone worked so hard to inflate. The so-called miniatures aren't actually smaller in stature than regular amaryllises—the overall size and the length of the flower spikes

are virtually the same, sometimes even greater than the large-flowered types. But the blossoms are one-third the size. 'Alfresco', 'Christmas Star', 'Pico Bello', 'Joker', and 'Top Choice' are some names to look for.

Another trait gaining admirers is the streaked and slashed petals of hybrids such as 'Papilio' and 'Jaguar'. It's a captivating, almost insectlike look, and it's carried also in the new Cybister amaryllises. Work still needs to be done, however. In my experience, many of the miniatures flower only briefly. My best results come from 'Amourette', which looks like a downsized 'Apple Blossom', blossoming over a long period.

Hybridizers are continuing to expand not only flower size but also the spectrum of colors. Even the palest hint of chartreuse in 'Green Goddess' and 'Lemon & Lime' (these two hybrids look identical to my eye) has met with a vigorous reception. So the push is on to create a true golden yellow. And blue might be in the future.

## Getting the Best Flowers

Amaryllises are as close as you'll come to no-fail flowering houseplants, but they still have their druthers. Achieving the first spike can hardly be avoided—they're so eager to blossom, in fact, that amaryllis bulbs often arrive with the snout of a flower bud poking out of the bulb. Even if that spike has made progress, it always straightens out and greens up when you get it potted.

Soil is not a big issue, although a well-drained potting medium is preferred. Much more crucial is proper watering. Over-generous watering when you first pot an amaryllis can cause bulb rot and poor root development. Better to let the bulb dry out between drinks.

Plant amaryllises so that the top quarter of the bulb is exposed above the soil level. Firming the bulb into the soil helps prevent the plant from tipping over when balancing a full head of flowers. Potting in a clay pot also anchors plants. Staking the stems is another good preventive measure.

I always assumed that amaryllis spikes stretched long or stayed short depending upon environmental conditions—longer spikes being the result of too much heat and too little light. But in fact certain varieties are bred for longer spikes. 'Red Lion', for example, tends to bear long spikes (though it is true that any

amaryllis grown in a dark corner with the heat cranked high will get leggy). And a distinct, long-stemmed breed has been developed to fuel the cut-flower trade. Furthermore, all amaryllises tend to make shorter flower spikes late in the season.

A temperature of about 55°-60°F is ideal for keeping your flowers in prime condition. This will prolong a spike's bloom for roughly six weeks. Then there's always the promise of further spikes to come: as many as two or three are typical if you continue to water the bulb regularly but sparingly.

After blooming finishes, the growth cycle begins. Rather than struggling to keep your amaryllis content indoors, you might as well entertain it outdoors in the garden, watering and fertilizing the bulb as you would any other garden plant. Reduce water around Labor Day to provoke dormancy, and store it in a cool (but not cold—45°-50°F. works well), dark place. Then begin the potting-blooming-growing cycle once again.

Sounds simple and easy. All the same, I often have trouble blossoming amaryllis for the second time around. I always assumed that the fault lay with inattentiveness on my part during the busy summer months. But Thomas Everett eased my conscience. Apparently, he experienced the same problem, and in his *Encyclopedia of Horticulture* he explains that, unlike other bulbs, amaryllis roots are accustomed to growing year round. However, the bulbs are cut clean for shipping. Everett's theory is that the effort of regrow-



'Papilio'

ing roots often precludes flowering in the second year.

No matter. I'm never without an amaryllis in winter. Every year there's another shade, or a different spin on the same theme to try. Something with more green in the throat such as 'Angelique', with speckles like those of 'Wonderland', or with more petals like 'Allure'—there is always some new temptation waiting to lure me in. And I'm willing. An amaryllis in winter is worth a whole brigade of spring bulbs. ♡

### Aftercare

When the flowers are gone, cut off the scapes. You'll note that the bulb is smaller after this massive flowering effort. Six to 10 leaves will then grow, and they should be kept growing until mid-October to rebuild the bulb. Then withdraw water. The leaves will wither. Then cut them off and put the pot in a warm (70°F), dry place for a month to 6 weeks. The rest period sets the bud.

## A Dozen Beauties

CULTIVAR	COLOR	FLOWER SIZE	STEM LENGTH	BLOOMS/BULB
'Orange Sovereign'	Orangey red	9 inches	18-20 inches	8-12 blooms/bulb
'Red Lion'	Dark, rich red	9 inches	18-20 inches	8-12 blooms/bulb
'Candy Floss'	Dark rose with green throat	7.5 inches	17 inches	6-9 blooms/bulb
'Carnival'	Bright red with white rims	7.25 inches	18 inches	6-8 blooms/bulb
'Apple Blossom'	Pink and white	7 inches	22-24 inches	8-12 blooms/bulb
'Nagano'	Salmon with white streaking	7 inches	18-20 inches	10-14 blooms/bulb
'Miracle'	Cardinal red	7 inches	16 inches	6-11 blooms/bulb
'Joker'	White with red streaking	4.5 inches	10 inches	6-11 blooms/bulb
'Top Choice'	Deep red with darker throat	4 inches	13 inches	14-18 blooms/bulb
'Papilio'	Pale green/burgundy striping	4 inches	20 inches	4-6 blooms/bulb
'Jaguar'	Orange, red, white, and green	4.5 inches	15 inches	12-16 blooms/bulb
'Lemon & Lime'	Soft yellowy green	4 inches	16-20 inches	8-10 blooms/bulb