



ask the landscape professional

Linda K. Lillie of Sprigs & Twigs

Welcome to my weekly series!

Feel free to send me questions you'd like to have me answer and I will do my best to address the ones of most general interest. Email or mail your questions to:

info@sprigsandtwigs.net or

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Question #1 this Week: *My mother always "forced" paperwhite narcissus bulbs to grow indoors for fall/winter enjoyment, but I remember that they grew tall and fell over. I recently heard that alcohol can be used to stunt their growth. Is that worth a try? ... Carol*

Linda's Answer: It sure is. About ten years ago, William Miller, a horticulturist at Cornell University, began experiments with using alcohol to "water" paperwhite narcissus bulbs. He found that paperwhites watered with a 4-6% solution of alcohol were one-half to one-third the size of a full size plant, but equally beautiful and fragrant. It is not really understood why this happens, but probably has to do with the plant having to devote more of its energy to getting access to the water that is in the alcohol solution.



Nevertheless, you can easily get the same result at home. The key is to use a 4-6% solution of alcohol in water. Outside this range, you will not be successful (significantly outside of this range, you will kill the plant). Don't use beer or wine, but otherwise any alcohol will work - vodka, gin, whiskey, tequila, etc. Rubbing alcohol works too. Look at the label on the bottle. Let's say you use whiskey that is 40% ABV (alcohol by volume). You want to end up with about a 5% solution, so you'll mix 1 part whiskey with 7 parts water. See the table below.

Starting with 10% alcohol ABV, mix 1 part water + 1 part alcohol = 5% alcohol solution

Starting with 15% alcohol ABV, mix 2 parts water + 1 part alcohol = 5% alcohol solution

Starting with 20% alcohol ABV, mix 3 parts water + 1 part alcohol = 5% alcohol solution

Starting with 25% alcohol ABV, mix 4 parts water + 1 part alcohol = 5% alcohol solution

Starting with 30% alcohol ABV, mix 5 parts water + 1 part alcohol = 5% alcohol solution

To start, plant your paperwhite bulbs in gravel or marbles and soak with water. When the roots start to form in 1-2 weeks, replace the water with your 4-6% solution of alcohol and water. Use your alcohol solution for all further watering of your bulbs. That's all there is to it!

Linda K. Lillie has been President of Sprigs & Twigs, Inc. for the last 19 years. She is a graduate of Connecticut College in Botany, an accredited NOFA Organic Land Care Professional, a Connecticut Master Gardener and a national award winning landscape designer for her design and installation projects..

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