

# Planting amaryllis bulbs for the holidays



By Nate O'Meara

Growing up in my grandfather's house, I recall how he would plant amaryllis bulbs every year for the holidays.

I loved as a kid watching the long stem emerge from the bulb. Since it grew inches a day, you could see the plant's growth in real time! Soon one-by-one 3 to 4 flower buds would emerge on the foot and half tall stock. Each bud would swirl out from the center and point in a different direction. Finally, the buds would crack open and reveal 6-inch wide hibiscus-like flowers in hues of dark red, pink, and white.

In carrying on my grandfather's tradition, I plant an amaryllis each holiday season. To this day, I am still mesmerized by these amazing plants as it is so rare to have such huge flowers open before your eyes! With our gardens dormant and the dark cold days upon us, they also add a much needed pop of color! This year while I was planting a variety called 'Apple blossom' that has soft pink and white blossoms, I got to thinking: how did these remarkable plants get their unique name and where in the world are they native to?

Like many plants, the scientific and common names of amaryllis can be confusing. The plant we commonly call “amaryllis” and plant at the holidays, is a South American native in the genus *Hippeastrum*, while the true amaryllis species (*Amaryllis* spp.) or sometimes called belladonna lilies originated in South Africa. Both, however, are in the amaryllis plant family (*Amaryllidaceae*). Confused yet?

The 90 species in the genus *Hippeastrum* is native primarily to tropical and subtropical regions of Brazil and the central southern Andes (Peru, Bolivia and Argentina), but some species occur as far north as Mexico and the Caribbean. Most commercial hybrids grown at the holidays are derived from 6 species. Breeding began in England back in 1799, making the tradition of planting amaryllis at the holidays a popular activity in the nineteenth century. Today, Americans import more than 10 million amaryllis bulbs annually consisting of more than 600 named hybrids developed by modern breeders in the Netherlands, South Africa, US, Japan, and Israel.

The name amaryllis means “to sparkle” in Greek and was originally applied to the South African species by the ancient Greeks. According to Greek mythology, the origins of the amaryllis plant is traced to a strange but heartwarming love affair between a maiden named Amaryllis and a shepherd named Alteo. Alteo was known to be a strong, handsome man who adored flowers and plants, but had no interest in the ladies of his town. In order to win his affection, Amaryllis walked to Alteo’s house each day for thirty days, piercing her heart with a golden arrow that spilled her blood along the path. When she pierced her heart for the last time, she noticed several beautiful bright red flowers springing up where her blood spilled. Amaryllis plucked the flowers and offered them to Alteo. Alteo was so enamored by the flowers and Amaryllis that he fell in love with her and named the plant after his new sweetheart.

In order to bring these beautiful plants into your home this holiday season, purchase amaryllis kits (soil and pot included!) or individual bulbs at nurseries, online seed companies and hardware stores. Plants take up to 8 weeks to bloom so I recommend obtaining your bulb(s) as soon as possible. Plants are typically hardy to USDA zones 8 to 10 so they cannot survive outside in a Flagstaff winter and need to be grown in containers indoors. Planting amaryllis bulbs is easy. Place the bulb in good draining potting soil with the green growing tip pointing up and about half of the bulb exposed above the soil surface. Place the pot in a warm room away from direct light and keep the soil consistently moist. As the stem grows and if it leans towards the light, turn the pot slightly each day. Use stakes or small stones to support the stem if it becomes too top-heavy.

Sit back and wait for the flower magic to happen! Happy holidays!

**NATE O’MEARA** is the Executive Director of the Arboretum at Flagstaff ([www.thearb.org](http://www.thearb.org)) and has worked as an ethnobotanist and horticulturist. This article was adapted from his blog [www.omearagardens.com](http://www.omearagardens.com).

Nate O’Meara is the Executive Director of the Arboretum at Flagstaff ([www.thearb.org](http://www.thearb.org)) and has worked as an ethnobotanist and horticulturist. This article was adapted from his blog [www.omearagardens.com](http://www.omearagardens.com).