



CHARLOTTE THIBAUT / Monitor staff

In the dead of winter, signs of life

I'll force a few bulbs, enjoy a bit of spring

By DEBORAH STONE
For the Monitor

By this time of year in northern climes, most two-legged creatures need proof that life goes on. Typically, they throw themselves into seed and gardening catalogues, whose luscious photos and hyped-up text promise infinite abundance and everlasting beauty.

I'm a catalogue devotee, too, but I have more immediate ways of finding my pulse. I force a few bulbs.

When I was 10, my horticulturist mother wisely figured to transmit her passion by starting me on paperwhites. Kids need instant gratification, and you get it with paperwhite bulbs. Mom showed me how to take three or four brown onion-looking things, set them on pebbles in a bowl, add water up to their bottoms, and put the arrangement on a window sill.

It still amazes me that you don't even need dirt, which is hard to come by this time of year anyway, or was before somebody began the improbable Brooklyn Bridge stunt of packaging dirt in plastic, shipping it around the country, and selling it. That also amazes me.

Anyway, you put the bulbs on a bed of water, and you wait. Mom promised it wouldn't be too long, and every year she turns out to be right. It's one of the few things I'm eager to admit that my mother was right about. Already on the second day, the bulb starts to send down white roots. I like to plant some of my bulbs in clear glass containers on clear glass marbles so I can watch the roots seek their own private niches.

When you buy paperwhite bulbs, they typically have small green shoots, about 2 inches long and bent over like crooked fingers. On the third or fourth day, the green fingers start to uncrook, and once they've straightened up, the leaves start to grow. A few days later, you see an embryonic flower head, rather like a teaspoon of pearl barley wrapped in a thin, semi-translucent wanton skin.

Sometime near the end of the second week, the flowers pop. Usually, I can tell they've bloomed before I see them by the scent that fills the air as I come into the room. Sure enough, clusters of delicate white petals froth and bubble atop the stalks.

I always start the winter with paperwhites to take the edge off my hunger, but meanwhile, I launch other kinds of narcissus, hyacinths and amaryllis, staggering them to bloom throughout January, February, March and April. They all take longer than paperwhites to do their thing, but — perhaps for exactly that reason — they all seem more exotic.

More important than their beauty, though, is their testimony to the life force. There in a flaky, brown-skinned, apparently dead bulb waits a living organism, determined to unfold its fidelity to its species and its individual quirks into a celebra-

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tion of life.

And although I know the perennials in my outdoor garden will do this life-thing pretty much all on their own come summer, I take certain comfort in knowing that my indoor bulbs need my care and attention as much as I need to witness their exuberant growth.

(Deborah Stone lives in Lempster and writes about politics, social issues and nature. Her newest book, *The Samaritan's Dilemma: Should Government Help Your Neighbor?*, was published by Nation Books in July.)

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