



Show stoppers: If you receive amaryllis bulbs as Christmas presents, use them with primulas, *Bellis perennis* and auriculas to make an early spring table display

Fabulous & festive

Add instant glamour to your home with an amaryllis, the queen of winter-flowering bulbs, says Sarah Raven



Amaryllis (their botanical name *Hyacinthus* has never caught on), have now stolen the show from poinsettias as our favourite Christmas plant – and I say thank goodness.

These archetypal festive blooms are indeed the queen of winter-flowering bulbs and, in my opinion, they beat those gaudy pot plants hands down. But there's something too strong, too loud about the full-on scarlet varieties. I like true, Dita Von Teese lipstick red, but in a flower on this scale, it's too much.

What I want in an amaryllis is a deeper and richer colour, more port wine than strawberry juice, or not a red at all, maybe a white with a trace of green.

In pursuit of amaryllis with this more elegant, classier and more glamorous grandeur, my quest took me to Holland. There I tracked down one of the world's leading amaryllis growers, Kees van Velden, who is based southwest of The Hague. To visit Holland is to travel to the source of quality bulbs and the van Velden family breeds and grows a good range.

Easy and exotic

Amaryllis originate in Brazil, but it's the Dutch who have house-trained them. If you get the flower shape and colour right, these are the bulbs to grow or give as presents at this time of year. Grown properly (see instructions, next page), they're reliable and easy.

The current growth in popularity of the amaryllis is impressive. Waitrose reports that customers' fondness for this bulb has boomed by 17 per cent this year.

"Amaryllis have proved to be very popular in recent years," says the store's horticulture buyer, Tracey Telford. "Customer appetite for amaryllis is definitely on the march."

Adam Taylor, director of Taylors Bulbs, which supplies flower bulbs to 2,000 British garden centres, nurseries and landscapers, now sells 200,000 amaryllis annually – up 15 per cent this year.

"Amaryllis is a great Christmas gift because it's an added-value plant. People see it from start to finish. They plant it, it's reliable, needs little looking after and is eye-catching," he says. "Poinsettias

are an instant flower, but you don't have the long-lasting thrill of seeing how they turn out. More customers write to us about the success of their amaryllis than any other flower."

Choose a style

There are two flower shapes in the amaryllis family, the large, blowsy tuba and the more delicate, little spidery clarinets.

If you've got a large room, or want to make a big splash at a party, go for one – or even better, three or five – of the whoppers.

If it's just for you, or in a bedroom, the smaller, more intimate and unusual plants are the ones to choose.

The flower life of the large ones does seem to be longer, but that doesn't mean the smaller amaryllis is not worth having.

Each individual flower should last nearly a fortnight and there should be several on a stem – which will open in succession – and several stems from one bulb.

Among the small ones – the so-called spider-flowered variety, 'Emerald' is one of van Velden's favourites, subtle and delicate, with white-green flowers with the faintest crimson veins and pencil-thin edge to each bloom.

Then there's 'Chico', more like a tropical orchid than an amaryllis, and he recommends 'Lima', too, which looks like a huge tropical butterfly, its top wings crimson, the bottom a soft, pale green.

Big impact blooms

The van Veldens are experimenting with a few of these more delicate varieties, but it's the large-flowered amaryllis that have formed the backbone of their business for decades.

From the deep, rich colour me two stunners, 'Hercules', an incredible pink-red, like shot Victorian silk, with every flower huge and five or six to a stem. When I first saw it I wasn't sure, but the colour is subtle and grows on you. "This is good and reliable and because it's new and unusual, it set to be huge," van Velden says. Then there's 'Liberty', the loveliest deep, dark red – the port wine I'd

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been looking for. There are several dark reds on the market such as 'Bacchanal' and 'Clove', but van Velden reports that 'Liberty' is one of the fastest from planting to flower and so perfect to grow, or give, for Christmas.

There is a vast towering pure white, 'Mont Blanc', which has the biggest flowers of all, which are very wide and open. This has been around for years and is very reliable.

"I love amaryllis for this time of year. When I see them in the house, they immediately make me feel Christmassy – warm inside," he says. "It's an incredible thing that such an ugly bulb makes such a magnificent flower. You can't believe that something so beautiful will emerge."

There were two other varieties growing in the vast glasshouse full of amaryllis about which I could not quite decide. The first was 'Picotee', well known, with the red markings around the petals' outer edge and 'Jewel', a pure white-green, but a double flower.

Most double amaryllis are too heavy and complicated to be beautiful, but this one was more interesting. From one bulb some flowers were single and some

Floral flourish: Kees van Velden with some of the company's blooms; 'Hercules', centre, and 'Lima' both stand out from the crowd, but are as easy to grow as more common varieties

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double, but not fully so. They had more of a ruffle than a full set of second petals. I liked that irregularity.

These are all good but 'Green Goddess' stood out to all of us as the queen supreme. This is reminiscent of *Littum regale*, with soft crimson stippings on the outer petals and the same elegant trumpet shape. It is regarded as easy and reliable, with at least three flowering stems in full flower on every bulb the van Veldens grew, with more to follow.

"My favourite four specialist varieties are 'Picotee', 'Lime', 'Luna' and 'Hercules'," van Velden adds. "They all stand out from the crowd, but are just as easy to grow as the ones you'll see on the high street."

If you plant amaryllis bulbs now, or receive one for Christmas, they will be in flower in eight to 10 weeks, and one bulb should then go on looking good for about the same length of time.

You won't get such an interesting range of varieties, but you could buy the plants already potted and near to flowering for your Christmas table. They're guaranteed to flourish with minimal TLC – and if you follow a few simple rules – can blossom for New Year's Eve, Burns Night and even your St Valentine's Day dinner.

Planting instructions

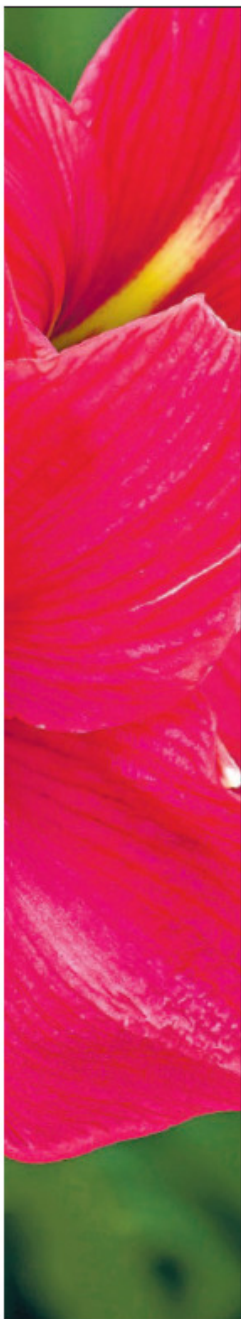
● Amaryllis like a tight fit in their pot, with about an inch between the bulb and the side, so if you're planting just one bulb – depending on the age and size of the bulb – you'll need a 6-8in diameter container, with a depth of nearly twice that. This will allow plenty of room for good root growth.

● Before planting, hydrate the desiccated roots by soaking them in tepid tap water overnight. The easiest way to do this is rest the base of the bulb on a jam jar, with all the roots, but not the bulb base, sitting in the water below.

● Amaryllis have a tendency to rot, so drainage is vital. Put a good handful of crocks in the bottom of your pot to help with drainage and then mix together equal parts of multipurpose compost and horticultural grit or perlite.

● Don't plant the bulb to the usual level. It's important that the shoulder of the bulb sits a third above the surface of the compost.

● It's the apex of the bulb where the leaves emerge which is the most vulnerable to rot, with water seeping in and decaying the heart, so this part mustn't sit in water. This looks odd, with



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the bulb perched so high, but that's the way it should be.

- Planted so high, you'll need to give it some support. You could put in a cane and tie it in as soon as the stem gets to a decent height, but try a bunch of twigs for support – silver birch, dogwood, hazel or alder – pushing some in around the edge and a few branches in between.

Aftercare

- These are hot-country tender plants and they love it in the warm; 68F is ideal in a light and well-ventilated place, free from draughts.
- A shelf above a radiator is ideal. Keep the compost moist until a shoot appears and then water more.
- Water from the top using tepid tap water, and once the water has drained through into the saucer, tip it away.
- As soon as the flowers start to open, move the plant to a cooler place to prolong the life of the flowers; 50-59F is fine, in as light a position as possible.
- Each flower stem should last about three weeks before they brown. If you start with a stonking great bulb there should be at least one or two more flowering stems to come.

Reader offer



- Buy one large amaryllis 'Papilio' bulb, supplied with a gift box that doubles as a growing container for only £14.99. Call 0844 573 6015 for credit/debit card orders quoting ref. TET21. Delivery to UK addresses only. Subject to availability. To buy online, visit gardenshop.telegraph.co.uk/offers

- Order by phone before 8pm tonight, and we will dispatch in time for Christmas.

Prepare for next year

- To ensure your amaryllis bulbs flower next year, you need to encourage the foliage to photosynthesise as long as possible.
- These are not hardy so don't plant them out in the garden. Cut the old flower spikes down, but leave the foliage and keep them somewhere light and warm and continue to feed and water.
- They also need a dry, dormant season, so once the leaves begin to die back in late summer, stop watering and allow the foliage to shrivel.
- Keep the bulb dry in the garden shed or under a greenhouse bench until autumn. Don't repot it for the first couple of years; amaryllis don't like root disturbance.
- When the temperatures in your greenhouse fall below 50F, bring it into the warmth again and begin gentle watering. Within a couple of weeks your bulb will start to reshoot. Then start the whole process above again.

- Visit www.sarahraven.com for various amaryllis varieties
- www.gebrvanvelden.nl
- www.royalcolors.com
- www.waitrose.com/flowers