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SUMMARY

Paperwhites are easy to grow indoors and can provide a bright spot in the winter. Here's how to keep them from getting leggy.

Editor's note: Paperwhites and other bulbs, including lilies, can be very toxic if chewed on by children or pets. Keep dangerous plants away from kids and pets.

For more information about toxic plants and how they affect humans and animals, visit:

- www.calpoison.org, and
- <https://www.aspcapetcare.com/pet-care/animal-poison-control>.

Better Paperwhites with Alcohol

By Earlene Millier, UC Master Gardener

A fascinating growing hack keeps paperwhites from flopping.

Q. I love to have paperwhites in bloom during the fall and winter, but they always get so tall that they flop over. How can I keep the plants from doing this?

A. As the weather cools, our thoughts turn to having greenery indoors. Paperwhites (*Narcissus tazetta*) are the perfect plant — they're easy to grow, and the fragrant white flowers can fill a room with a luscious scent. But, they do tend to get leggy and can sometimes fall over.

Researchers at Cornell discovered a simple way to prevent that. Forcing the bulbs on pebbles to bloom with a 5 percent solution of alcohol in water kept the foliage and flower stalks about one-third to one-half shorter than if the bulbs were forced in straight water. The alcohol solution resulted in stockier, shorter leaves and stems, but it did not reduce flower production or affect the scent.

If you'd like to give this a try, here's how: Plant the bulbs on pebbles or glass marbles in a 2- or 3-inch-deep dish, and add water up to the bottom of the bulbs.

Place the dish where the plants will get bright light. After a week, when the green shoots are 1 to 2 inches tall, pour off the water, and refill the pot with a 4 to 6 percent solution of alcohol in water, and use the same solution each time you water your paperwhites.

The exact concentration of alcohol is not important as long as you stay well below 10 percent, because a higher level will cause growth problems.

Once the plants are flowering, move them to a cool area to prolong flowering.

Here is how to get a 4 to 6 percent solution of alcohol in water:

- Mix one part of 70 percent isopropyl, or rubbing, alcohol with 11 parts of water.
- Or, mix one part of 90 percent rubbing alcohol with 15 parts water.
- Or, mix one part of a 40 percent distilled spirit (gin, vodka, whiskey, rum, tequila, etc.) to seven parts of water.



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- Avoid using beer, wine or any sweetened alcohol.

How does this work? The researchers theorize that mixing alcohol with water reduces the plants’ intake of water and puts some “water stress” on the plants, thus reducing stem and leaf growth.

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