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When the holiday decorations are put up, it is often a dreary time indoors. One plant that can add some color is the amaryllis. Not only are they one of the showiest flowers around, but they stay in bloom for at least 4-6 weeks and with proper care can re-bloom year after year.

The amaryllis, or *Hippeastrum*, is a tender bulb plant from tropical America. The amaryllis bulb produces large, trumpet-shaped flowers, in clusters of four to six flowers per stem. Colors include shades of red, orange, pink as well as white and striped ones. The leafless, hollow flowering stems are usually the first thing to emerge from the bulb, followed by the foliage. The flower stem can grow to be two to three feet tall or more, often making the plant somewhat top-heavy, so staking or weighing down the container can help prevent the pot from toppling over.

Amaryllis are sold as dry bulbs, pre-packaged in containers or as blooming plants. If you are starting out with a bulb that hasn't begun to grow, be sure that at least half of the bulb is above the soil level. The container should be only slightly larger than the bulb to ensure even distribution of water and roots. Water sparingly until you see the bulb beginning to sprout. Excessive watering of a dormant bulb is harmful and may cause the bulb to rot. Once growth has begun, move the plant to a sunny location and make sure that it stays moist. Turn the plant frequently to keep the stem growing straight.

Temperature does affect how fast the bulb will bloom and will also determine the eventual height and length of blooming. Bulbs which are exposed to warm conditions will bloom faster, but will lead to taller plants that will finish blooming much more quickly. Bulbs in a cool location tend to be shorter and stay in bloom longer, but it will delay the onset of flowering. Typically once the bulb shows new growth, your plant should be in bloom within four to six weeks.

It is normal for the plant to produce a lone flower stalk, with the leaves appearing after bloom. Occasionally you will be lucky and have two flower stalks. As bulbs age and grow larger from year to year, multiple bloom stalks are common. Each flower stalk will have a minimum of four blooms, with some of the larger, older bulbs producing up to six flowers per stalk.

Once the flowers have faded, cut the flower stalk back to within several inches of the bulb. Allow the foliage to grow as a houseplant until it is safe to move the plants outside in the spring. You can sink the pot in the ground to reduce your watering schedule or plant it. Many gardeners in Arkansas have started planting their bulbs outdoors in the spring, and leave them there year-round. While they shouldn't survive outside in Arkansas, they have been doing pretty well, even in some of our colder winters. If you try it this year, just make sure you cut off the spent foliage after a frost and mulch. Left outdoors, the plants naturally bloom in late spring each year.

If you plan to bring them indoors each fall, while they are outside, make sure that the plant receives at least a half a day of sunlight. Fertilize the plant monthly. By September, gradually reduce your watering and quit fertilizing. With the cooler temperatures, shorter days, and drier conditions, the leaves should begin to fade. Bring the bulb inside, cut off the old foliage and let the bulb rest for a month or two. This resting period will usually end on its own, when you see the bulb beginning to sprout again. Then you start the cycle all over again.

If you want to extend the season of bloom for a long period of time, purchase several bulbs and stagger the planting. This can give you months of beautiful flowers. Whether you've never had an amaryllis before, or you have been growing them for years, amaryllis are a good investment for color and flowers. They also make a great and welcome gift. So pot one up and enjoy!