



How to flowers indoors on cut branches

A tall vase of forsythia or other branches coming into early flower can chase away the winter blahs. Forcing branches is a fun and easy project for you or your children. It is fascinating to watch the branches develop.



This is the perfect time of year to cut branches of shrubs and trees for forcing. The buds for spring flowering shrubs and trees develop during the previous year. They require six weeks of cold weather before their dormancy can be successfully broken by forcing. By late January and early February most spring flowering shrubs and trees have met that requirement in this area. Very few plants will force earlier than February because the minimum chilling requirement has not been satisfied. Other plants will not force well until after March. As a rule of thumb, flowers on woody branches can be forced after the buds begin to swell in late winter and early spring. Normally, this is about one or two months ahead of the natural bloom schedule. Branches collected too early result in smaller flowers or shriveled buds that fall off.

In its simplest form, forcing is just a matter of cutting bare branches from the desired shrub or tree and placing them in water indoors. There are a few tips for insuring success, though. First, make sure temperatures are above freezing before you cut the stems. Bringing frozen stems into a warm indoor environment might cause damage to the stems due to the abrupt change in temperature. Look for plump buds for cutting. The plumper buds are usually the developing flower buds. The more developed the buds, the more quickly they will develop indoors. Use pruning shears or a sharp knife to cut the branches and carefully split the cut end 2 to 4 inches. Remove any buds and twigs that will be under water. After the branches are cut, immerse the cut ends into a container of warm water so that the stems begin to take up water quickly. Some sources recommend that cut branches be totally immersed into lukewarm water for a few hours after cutting, again to prevent a loss of water and keep the buds swollen. Another recommendation is to wrap the branches in wet newspaper until the buds start to open. All of this will aid water absorption by the branch, which is essential for the flowers to develop. Place the vase of branches in a dimly lighted location (away from a bright window) with a temperature of 60 to 70 days. Change the water every few days to minimize bacteria development. If you have to expose the branches to air when changing the water, recut the ends of the stems under water again.

One more tip on cutting branches - always cut the shrub or tree with an eye towards the symmetry and desired size of the plant. You have to live with this plant all year long and you want it to be attractive. Some people who want to force a lot of branches in winter and early spring plant shrubs and trees specifically for that purpose in hidden away places. Then they do not have to worry about shape, although they do have to be aware that over-pruning can kill the specimen.

It can take anywhere from 1 to 8 weeks for flowers to develop. The fatter the buds and the closer to their natural bloom time that you cut the branches, the sooner they will open. Forsythia, quince and pussywillow branches generally take only 1 to 3 weeks to force, because they are among the earliest blooming shrubs. For apple, dogwood, peach, plum and lilac, you should wait until the middle of March before cutting them and bringing them indoors to force for blooms.

Some of the most common shrubs and trees used for forcing include of course the pussywillow, forsythia and Japanese or flowering quince. Others to consider are redbud trees, flowering dogwood (*Cornus florida*), hawthorn, witch hazel, saucer magnolia, star magnolia, apple and crabapple, flowering cherry, spirea, fothergilla, and lilac. By the way You can dry the pussy willow if you wish. As soon as they bloom, place them in a vase with NO water to air dry. You can use them in dried arrangements as an everlasting, once they dry. If you keep them in water they will root, and can replanted once there is a root system formed if you don't wish to dry them.

Do not limit yourself to flowering shrubs and trees when you think of forcing. Ordinary non-flowering trees and shrubs can also be forced, to interesting effect. Bittersweet is one of the more sculptural twigs to force. Red maples create bright scarlet buds along their gray branches. Birch trees produce long, fuzzy catkins flowered by tiny new bright green leaves. Weeping willow branches make wonderfully drooping chartreuse switches.

Updated: February 2006
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