

Department of Horticulture

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Forcing Branches for Winter Color

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Does the bleak, cold dullness of winter sometimes get you down? Then why not bring springtime into your home by forcing tree and shrub branches into bloom? Branches can be used as background for an arrangement or for an entire floral display, and you can prune your shrubs and trees as you selectively remove branches for forcing.

Early spring flowering trees and shrubs form their flower buds in the fall before the plants go dormant. After a period of at least 8 weeks of temperatures below 40°F (usually after January 1), branches can be cut and forced into bloom.

Most flowering shrubs are fairly easy to force, while trees are more difficult. The later in the winter you cut the branches, the shorter the forcing time becomes. See Table 1 for suggested trees and shrubs and their forcing times.

Gathering Branches

Select healthy, young branches with numerous flower buds, which are usually larger and more plump than foliar buds. When cutting fruit tree branches, choose those that have many spurs, the short compact side shoots which bear the flowers. Choose branches from crowded areas of the plant when possible, since you will be removing some of the plant's natural spring display.

Follow good pruning principles when cutting the branches. Cut about 1/4 inch above a side bud or branch so that no stub is left behind. Cut the branches about 6-18 inches long; longer branches are easiest to use in floral arrangements.

Getting Branches to Bloom

After bringing the branches indoors, make a second cut on a slant just above the previous cut. If temperatures are below freezing when you cut the branches, immerse the branches full length in cool water for several hours or overnight. A large tub or basin may be helpful. This keeps the buds from bursting prematurely. If the weather is above freezing, there is no need for a soak.

Next, put the branches in a container which will hold them upright. Add warm water (110°F) no higher than 3 inches on the stems. A flower preservative will help prolong the vase life of the branches (see Figure 1 for preservative recipes). Allow to stand for 20-30 minutes, and then fill the container with additional preservative solution. Place the container in a cool (60-65°F), partially shaded location. Keep the water level at its original height.

Finally, when the buds show color, move the branches to a lighted room. But don't put them in direct sunlight. At this time they can be removed from the storage container and arranged in the desired manner. Be sure the arrangement has an ample water supply at all times. To prolong its beauty, place the arrangement in a cool location, particularly during the evening.

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- 2 cups lemon-lime carbonated beverage
 - 2 cups water
 - 1/2 teaspoon household chlorine bleach

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- 2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
 - 1 tablespoon sugar
 - 1/2 teaspoon household chlorine bleach
 - mix with 1 quart water

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- 2 tablespoons white vinegar
 - 2 tablespoons sugar
 - 1/2 teaspoon household chlorine bleach
 - mix with 1 quart water

Figure 1. Recipes for preservative solutions.

Rooting

Rooting may occur on the branches of some species during the forcing period. If the rooted branch is desired for a new plant, remove the branch from the water when the roots are 1/4 to 3/8 inches long. All branches should be trimmed to a length of approximately 6-8 inches. Then pot individually, and keep moist until permanent roots are formed. When warm weather arrives, the new plant can be planted outdoors. However, protection may be needed for 1-2 years.

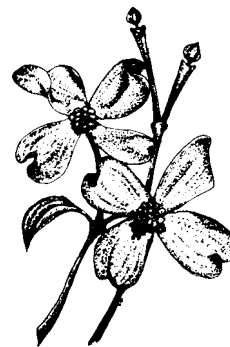
Table 1. Suggested plants for forcing.

Shrubs	Time to Force (weeks)	Description
Beauty Bush* <i>Kolkwitzia amabilis</i>	5	Small clusters of pink flowers on slender stems.
Bridal Wreath Spirea <i>Spirea prunifolia</i>	2	Small, white flowers in sprays. Double flowers last longer than singles.
Clove Currant <i>Ribes odoratum</i>	2	Small clusters of yellow, fragrant blooms.
Cornelian Dogwood <i>Cornus mas</i>	2	Dainty, yellow flowers in clusters.
Deutzia <i>Deutzia gracilis</i>	5	White flowers.
Flowering Almond* <i>Prunus glandulosa</i>	3	Delicate, pink flowers.
Flowering Quince <i>Chaenomeles</i> sp.	4	Long lasting, red or orange flowers.
Forsythia <i>Forsythia x intermedia</i>	2	Many yellow flowers.
Honeysuckb <i>Lonicera</i> sp.	2	Fragrant, pink or white flowers.
Lilac* <i>Syringa</i> sp.	4	Fragrant, lilac, blue, purple, or white flowers in large clusters.
Mockorange* <i>Philadelphus coronarius</i>	4	Clusters of white, fragrant blooms.
Pussy Willow <i>Salix</i> sp.	2	Fuzzy, white buds.
Privet <i>Ligustrum</i> sp.	2	Glossy, rich, green leaves.
Redtwig Dogwood <i>Cornus sericea</i> (<i>C. stolonifera</i>)	5	White flowers with red stems.
Rhododendron* <i>Rhododendron</i> sp.	4	Large clusters of blooms; wide variety of colors, depending on species.
Shadblow <i>Amelanchier</i> sp.	2	Dainty, white flowers.
Spicebush <i>Lindera benzoin</i>	2	Fragrant, pinkish-white flowers.
Vernal Witchhazel <i>Hamamelis vernalis</i>	2	Four yellow, strap-shaped petals.
Wisteria* <i>Wisteria</i> sp.	3	Blue-violet or white flower clusters.

Trees

Alder <i>Alnus</i> sp.	1	Flowers in long, drooping, reddish-brown spikes.
Beech <i>Fagus</i> sp.	3	Flowers in long, drooping spikes.
Buckeye <i>Aesculus parviflora</i>	5	White, pyramidal flower clusters.
Cherry* <i>Prunus</i> sp.	3	White or pink flowers in clusters.
Crabapple <i>Malus</i> sp.	4	White, pink, or red flowers in clusters. Single-flowering forces easier than double.
European Birch <i>Betula pendula</i>	2	Graceful branches; delicate, green leaves; drooping flower spikes.
Flowering Dogwood* <i>Cornus florida</i>	5	Large, white, long-lasting flowers.
Hickory* <i>Carya</i> sp.	2	Flowers in drooping, three-branched spikes.
Horsechestnut* <i>Aesculus hippocastanum</i>	5	White flowers in large pyramids.
Magnolia* <i>Magnolia</i> sp.	5	Large, creamy-white to deep red flowers. Easy to force.
Peach <i>Prunus persica</i>	4	Pink flowers.
Pear <i>Pyrus</i> sp.	4	White flowers in clusters.
Redbud* <i>Cercis canadensis</i>	2	Dark branches; small, magenta-pink flowers.
Red Maple <i>Acer rubrum</i>	2	Small, orange-red, unusual-looking flowers.
Weeping Willow <i>Salix babylonica</i>	2	Green foliage.

*Best cut in March; cutting earlier will delay blooming several weeks.



For more information on the subject discussed in this publication, consult your local office of the Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service.

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