

March 2021

FORCING BRANCHES FOR AN EARLY LOOK INTO SPRING

What does it mean to force branches? “Forcing” is bringing indoors the branches of flowering trees or shrubs into bloom during winter and early spring before their natural bloom times.

Trees and shrubs, which bloom in spring, form their flower buds the previous fall. After at least eight weeks of cold outdoors (under 40 degrees F), their branches are capable of blooming. To make sure they receive enough cold, don't cut branches until after January 1 in a "normal" year or after January 15 in a "mild" year. Branches harvested in late winter often come into bloom indoors sooner than those harvested earlier.

Use clean, sharp pruners. You can use 70-100% Isopropyl Alcohol (rubbing alcohol) to sterilize pruning tools. No mixing, soaking or rinsing is necessary with alcohol. Tools can simply be wiped, sprayed or dipped in isopropyl alcohol for immediate effectiveness against most pathogens. However, it has unpleasant harmful fumes and can be flammable. However, most experts recommend isopropyl alcohol for sterilizing garden tools.

Cut branches at least 12 inches long. Select branches with a large number of flower buds. These are often on younger branches. Make sure you are looking at flower buds and not leaf buds. The flower buds are usually larger and rounder. Leaf buds are generally smaller and pointy at the tips. If in doubt, cut a few buds open to look for leaf or flower parts inside. Branches force more readily if cut on a sunny afternoon or when temperatures are above freezing. Cut only branches that are not essential to the form of your shrub or tree, or make sure you confine your cutting to the back side of the plant, if there is one, or to crowded sections where a branch or two will not be missed. Generally speaking, the nearer the date is to a plant's natural blooming time, the sooner will begin flowering indoors. Bring the cut branches indoors, placing the stem ends immediately in warm water. If branches are in a bucket, mist them frequently the first few days or enclose in a plastic bag out of direct sun. If possible, submerge the whole stems in water, such as in a bathtub, overnight. This allows buds and stems to quickly absorb water and begin to break dormancy. You can make steeply angled cuts to encourage water uptake. However, the best method is to make a slit or two about two inches long in the bottom of the stem before placing in the water, such as in a cross or star pattern as viewed from the bottom. Do not smash the ends! Keep branches in a bucket of water in a cool area such as your basement (60 to 65 degrees F). Warmer temperatures cause buds to develop too rapidly and not open properly. Change the water every 2 to 3 days to ensure it stays clean.

Keep branches near a humidifier, or misted. Direct sunlight also may cause buds to fall, so keep in bright but indirect light. Once the flower buds show color, the branches can be used in arrangements. The vessel should be one that won't tip from the weight and size of branches. Use of floral preservatives, available at many garden stores and florists, may increase the vase life of the branches. (You can make your own preservative with 1 tablespoon of Listerine or 1 tablespoon of lemon-lime soda per quart of water.) The preservative will promote hydration and retard bacterial growth, keeping the water clear for up to a week. Once again, keep stems in bright, but indirect, light. Moving arrangements to a cool location at night (40 to 60 degrees F) will help them last longer.

For cutting as early as January, consider:

- o Cornelian Cherry - yellow flowers, 2 weeks to force into bloom
- o Forsythia - yellow flowers, one to 3 weeks to force
- o Witch Hazel - yellow flowers, one week to force
- o Poplar - long lasting, drooping flowers called "catkins," 3 weeks to force
- o Willow - catkins, 2 weeks to force

In February, consider:

- o The above plants
- o Red Maple - pink to red unusual flowers followed by leaves, 2 weeks to force
- o Alder - catkins, one to 3 weeks to force
- o Amelanchier or Serviceberry - white flowers, one to 3 weeks to force
- o Apples and Crabapples - white, pink and red flowers, 2 to 4 weeks to force with doubles slower than singles
- o Birch - long lasting catkins, 2 to 4 weeks to force
- o Quince - red to orange flowers, 4 weeks to force
- o Cherries - white and pink flowers, 2 to 4 weeks to force
- o Rhododendrons and Azaleas - later in month-many colors, 4 to 6 weeks to force
- o Pussy Willow - furry flowers, one to 2 weeks to force

o In March, consider:

- o Hawthorns - white, pink or red flowers, 4 to 5 weeks to force, careful of the thorns
- o Deutzia - white flowers, 3 to 4 weeks to force
- o Honeysuckle shrub - white to pink flowers, 2 to 3 weeks to force
- o Mockorange - white flowers, 4 to 5 weeks to force
- o Oaks - catkins, 2 to 3 weeks to force
- o Lilacs - many colors, 4 to 5 weeks to force
- o Spirea - white flowers, 4 weeks to force with double flowers lasting longer

*Cut various branches at various times for a succession of blooms and color indoors during our long winters.

White Flower Farm indicates that among their favorites for forcing are; Witch Hazel (Hamamelis), Magnolia, Forsythia, Eastern Redbud (Cercis canadensis), Shadbush (Amelanchier), flowering Quince (Chaenomeles), crabapple (Malus), flowering pear (Pyrus), flowering Cherry (Prunus), Viburnum, and Cornelian Cherry Dogwood (Cornus mas). Pussy Willows are a great choice for forcing indoors. They don't require water, and last for ages

By the time February arrives, most species suitable for forcing have experienced the required period of dormancy.

*This article is a compilation of three sources: University of Vermont Extension fact sheet, White Flower Farm (located in Connecticut), January 2021 and Fine Gardening magazine, Issue 83.

