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Flowering branches

PURCHASING AND CUTTING

FLOWERING BRANCHES are an ideal way to remind us of the promise of spring. They bring the color, texture, and fragrance into our homes. Cherry, forsythia, quince, leptospermum, and pussy willow are available from October to April from your local floral markets to your yard. Cherry blossoms, leptospermum, and quince are beautiful sweet shades of pink and white. Forsythia range from a bright deep yellow to a pastel buttery tone. Pussy willows range from a white, cream, and soft gray. Lilacs from the pure white to the deep violet shades in between. Other branches you may find in the market or locally grown are plum, peach, apricot, nectarine, almond redbud, dogwood, mock orange, and pyracantha to mention a few.

Forsythia, cherry, quince, and leptospermum boast clusters of one to two inch blossoms filling several eight to ten inch branches coming off of a main woody branch. Cherry branches are on the average 30" long; forsythia and quince average branches are 36-50" long. Pussy willows boast ½ to 1" catkins spaced close together along a single woody stem, 10 to 60" long. Lilacs are full clusters of sweet, fragrant flowers clustered at the top of the branch.

When purchasing or cutting flowering branches, choose the ones in a bud stage with a hint of color on the bloom. Pussy willows must have well developed catkins. Choose lilacs with the bottom third of the blossoms open, the top buds are mature. Some varieties of lilacs are disbudded to force flowering and to achieve long branches with clusters of flowers near the top of the stem.

STORAGE AND CONDITIONING

The secret of having beautiful blooming branches of spring flowering trees and shrubs in the middle of winter is tricking the branches into thinking it is early spring, or at least late winter. The way to do this is called forcing. Forcing is a centuries old technique.

Upon arrival from the flower market or your garden the branches need a big gulp of warm, clean water with flower food. Remove any foliage, buds, or loose bark that may be under the water in your conditioning or display container. The flower food will help the branches take up water faster, reduce bacteria and fungi, increase the vase life, and encourage bud opening. This will give the branches their first long drink that will reach up into the top of the flowering tip. In the dormant season the flow of water through deciduous trees and shrubs slows to nearly half, so at this time the branches must absorb all of the water they can, as if they are breaking winter dormancy and drinking the spring rains. Re cut two to three inches off of the ends of the stem. Place in warm preservative solution (100 to 110 degrees F). Ideally store them for several hours at around 40 degrees before using them. Almost all woody branches growing outdoors can easily be forced to bloom. Cut the branches after the plant has endured cold temperatures for an extended time, usually the beginning of January is a good example. To force the buds open place the stems into the same temperature and flower food solution as above, then hold them at a room temperature of 55 to 60 degrees F. Then gradually move the branches into warmer temperatures (70 to 75 degrees F) to encourage the blooms to open. Sudden temperature changes will cause the flowers to open erratically and shorten the vase life. Lilacs are rarely successfully forced open.

STABY

The blossoms can be forced into an almost open stage then placed into a cool environment for up to a week. If they have not chilled for a sufficient period of time they will not bloom. When needed, remove and allow the flowers to open. The stems that are cut in January usually take longer to develop and open than those cut in April. Branches with tight bulbs can be held for several weeks by placing them in the preservative solutions, covering them with a clear white plastic bag and refrigerating them. The bag keeps the humidity in and the flower buds hydrated. It lets light in for continued bud opening and prevents bacteria production.

When the time is right to cut, look for two to three foot branches that are loaded with leaf and flower buds about the diameter of a pencil. Take a clean knife or oriental sheer and make a clean diagonal cut anywhere along the branch. Do not destroy the natural symmetry of the plant.

DO NOT smash the stems. Please remember that crushing or smashing woody stems has not been proven to increase the water intake and extend the vase life. In fact it impedes the water flow, creates a bacteria source and shortens the vase life as you are damaging the necessary water carrying capillaries necessary to pump the water to the blossoms. The crisscross or "T" cut on the base of a flat cut stem or a clean angle cut with a clean sharp knife or oriental sheers are the suggested methods. Scissors and bunch cutters will crush the stem structure and limit the vase life of the flowering branch.

VASE LIFE

The lasting quality of blooming branches varies as to when the branch was cut and what stage it was in when it was cut. With the proper care and handling techniques using flower food they can last from three to ten days. To extend the blooming period, move the branches to a cooler spot at night, change the water, and clean the container every day or so. You will be able to control the blooming time somewhat by keeping the branches in a cooler, dimmer room to delay blooming, a brighter, warmer room to speed up blooming.