

# Forcing Cut Branches For Winter Flowers

James T. Midcap - Extension Horticulture

Cut branches forced into bloom can help add sunshine to those gloomy winter days and it is not hard to coax many into flower. Branches from cherry, plum, forsythia, quince and viburnums can be forced into blooming and used in arrangements. Large branches add height and width, while small branches add interest and graceful lines to casual bouquets.

Spring flowering trees and shrubs can be forced into bloom once winter conditions in our gardens have satisfied their dormancy requirements. With proper treatment they can be brought into bloom earlier than normal. With proper conditioning in water, provided with good light and proper temperatures, they will burst into flower 5 days to 2 weeks after cutting.

Some plants are quite easy to force into bloom such as forsythia, quince and pussy willow. Not all shrubs, however, are as easy. Those with late spring blooms are far more difficult. Included are viburnums, lilac and weigela. They are best cut close to their regular flowering time. Cherries and plums are excellent forcing specimens. The old fashioned purple leafed plum forces earlier than cherry. Many plants can be forced 1 to 2 months before their normal flowering. February is an excellent month for forcing many of the earlier flowering selections. March works well for the later flowering ones.

When winter arrives the flower buds are already formed on trees and shrubs. A period of dormancy is required before they will bloom. Plants differ in the amount of chilling, moisture, light and warm temperatures necessary to stimulate the spring flower buds. By February in most years, winter temperatures have satisfied the flower bud's dormancy requirement. Once done, you can force branches by duplicating spring conditions.

Choose a mild day to cut branches and try to cut them during the warmest part of the day when the buds are filled with moisture. Choose branches that are well budded and have interesting curves. Follow good pruning practices and prune to maintain the natural shape of the plant.

Allow the flowers to develop slowly to fully encourage large blooms with good color. First, mash the bottom inch or two of the stems with a hammer and place in water. Add a floral preservative or sugar with a drop of bleach. Change the water every few days over the forcing period. Leave the branches in a cool, dark spot until bud swell begins, then move them into a well lighted area to encourage the flower color to develop. Avoid placing the branches in direct sunlight. These practices extend the life of the branches by reducing the bacteria in the water and keep stems unclogged. Water uptake through the stems should provide ample moisture preventing the branches from drying out unless the room is too warm. Cool tempera-

tures allow buds to develop slowly and maintain flower color. When color appears in the bud it is time to arrange the branches in containers. Don't wait until the blossoms are fully opened.

Cutting and Forcing Branches for Bloom

Shrubs	Cutting Time	Forcing Time	Vase Life
Azalea	late Jan. early Feb.	3-6 weeks depends on species	5-10 days
Crabapple	mid-March	2-3 weeks	1 week
Deutzia	mid-March	2-3 weeks	2 weeks
Flowering Cherry	late Jan. mid-Mar.	3-4 weeks 2-3 weeks	1-2 weeks
Flowering Dogwood	mid-Mar.	2-4 weeks	7-10 days
Flowering Peach	late Jan.	4-5 weeks	1 week
Flowering Pear	late Jan. early Feb. mid-Mar.	4-5 weeks 2-3 weeks	1-2 weeks
Flowering Plum	late Jan.	3-4 weeks	10 days
Flowering Quince	Feb. mid-Mar.	3-5 weeks 2 weeks	4-7 days
Forsythia	early Jan. early Feb. mid-Mar.	3 weeks 2 weeks 1 week	1 week
Fothergilla	early Mar.	2-3 weeks	1 week
Japanese Pieris	early Feb. mid-Mar.	3-4 weeks 1-2 weeks	10 days
Lilac	early Mar.	4-6 weeks	1 week
Mockorange	mid-Mar.	4-5 weeks	2-3 days
Scotch Broom	late Jan. mid-Mar.	4-6 weeks 2-3 weeks	flowers do not last long (2-3 days but branches are very useful)
Spirea	mid-Mar.	2-3 weeks	7-10 days
Willow	Feb.	1-2 weeks	
Witchhazel	Jan.	1 week	3-5 days