



Hurry Spring Along: Bring the Outdoors In

This time of the year I become impatient for that first bit of fresh green or bloom. Since I know I'll have to wait another month or more for Mother Nature, I usually try to do something to push things along. Most years, in addition to forcing spring-flowering bulbs in my refrigerator, I help some branches come alive before their time. I like to try many different species.

My basic strategy involves hoodwinking the branches I've cut from nearby trees and shrubs into thinking spring has come, by providing the warmer temperatures and longer hours of light that trigger the flowering response in spring-flowering plants. Known as "forcing," this process requires very little time and effort. At this time of year, almost any material can be forced to flower in three to four weeks. The closer to the actual outdoor blooming date, the shorter the time necessary for indoor forcing.

I've found a host of flowering shrubs and trees suitable for forcing. Horse chestnut, pussy willow, shadbush, redbud, Cornelian cherry, spicebush, flowering quince, forsythia, spring witch hazel, bridalwreath spirea and magnolia produce the most spectacular displays. Fruit trees such as apple, plum, cherry, pear, peach and apricot also make lovely bouquets. The branches of almost any shrub or tree, including oak, birch and maple, are interesting to watch as they develop leaves and flowers indoors.

I wait until outdoor temperatures rise into the mid-to high 40's before collecting my branches. I choose branches full of plump buds and prune them on a slant, cutting lengths of up to three feet long. Formed last summer, these buds are ready to burst into bloom. Flower buds are often fatter, rounder and sometimes a different shape than leaf buds. Flower buds also tend to be more numerous on younger wood.

For easier arranging later on, I choose stems the thickness of my little finger, using

sharp pruning shears for a clean, quick-healing cut. Although pruning branches in winter won't harm the plant, I try to prune evenly to retain the plant's balanced shape.

After a winter like this one, I may not get as many blossoms as I'd like. The balmy weather of December and early January will have stimulated the buds of some woody plants to break dormancy and lose some of their winter hardiness. The long and bitter cold snaps that followed in February and March may have killed the flower buds on some species. Even if I don't have flowers, I know I'll at least get sprays of foliage for my efforts.

After I've collected the branches I want, I bring them indoors and immediately plunge the stems into a deep pail filled with water; sometimes I even put them in the bathtub with a few inches of tepid water. I leave them submerged for a few hours or even overnight so the stems and bud scales can take up as much water as possible. This makes the process of bud unfolding much easier for the flower.

Next, I place the branches in a bucket of water, adding a flower preservative to help them last longer, and set the bucket branches in a relatively cool place (60-65 degrees F) to develop. Higher temperatures will cause the buds to develop rapidly, but size, color and quality may be sacrificed. To keep the water from smelling bad, I change it once a week. I occasionally mist the developing branches with water from a spray bottle.

Branches need light for forcing, but not direct sunlight. Heat from direct sun is too intense, and often drying. I try to keep in mind the springtime conditions that promote flowering. "Thinking spring" helps boost my spirits, too.

Witch hazel and forsythia can take as little as one week to bloom; flowering fruits such as apple and cherry can take up to four weeks, and lilacs can take five.

When the flower buds have developed enough to show color, I remove the branches, arrange them in vases and put them on display just as the flowers begin to open. Arranging the branches with other spring flowering plants, such as daffodils and tulips, or with green foliage, provides a stunning contrast. The flowers and leaves will last

longer if you can move them to a cool location at night.

So, why not bring the first breath of spring into your home as you watch a few slender branches burst into leaf and flower while snow still covers the landscape. It will help replace those still-fresh memories of frozen water pipes, non-starting cars, and extra layers of clothing with the hope of certain spring.

Margaret Hagen

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