



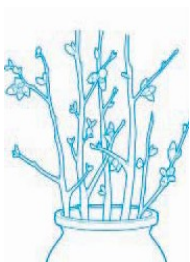
Forcing Flowering Branches for Winter Color

With the holidays at an end and lights and decorations stored in the attic, one's home can look a bit drab and dreary. However, there is an easy and economical solution to the problem—one that brings color back into rooms, beats the winter blahs and gets a jump on spring; forcing flowering branches.

The ideal period in which to do this is January and February which also happens to be the best time to prune deciduous trees and shrubs for shape, crossed branches and deadwood. Choose a day with above-freezing temperatures so that the selected branches do not experience a shock going from the cold to the warmth of indoors.



Some of the top plant choices for forcing are: forsythia, fothergilla, witch hazel, apple and cherry tree branches, Eastern red-bud, serviceberries and willows. Cut branches to the desired length (12-24 inches) choosing ones with diameters of a half-inch or less. Back inside the house, prepare a large bucket of warm water containing a packet of floral preservative, and set it aside. Next, partially fill a kitchen or laundry sink with very warm water, and submerge the cut ends of the branches. While holding the stems underwater, recut at a sharp angle a few inches above the original cut (this process allows for maximum water absorption). Immediately put all the recut branches into the bucket of warm water and place in a cool, 45-to-55-degree room. Change the water and preservative weekly or when the water is cloudy.



Buds will gradually open over a one to eight week period depending on the variety (the closer to the plant's natural bloom time, the sooner the cuttings will flower). To display the branches, choose a location with bright, indirect sunlight that is away from heat sources such as fireplaces, radiators or vents. Weekly cuttings of a variety of branches result in an ongoing floral display right up to spring-time, and to paraphrase gardening celeb Martha Stewart, "that's a good thing."

by Pat Miller '93