Force Branches for Early Spring Color
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Despite the fact that we are having an exceptionally mild winter, spring can never come early enough for me. While we can’t do much to hasten it along outside, we can bring in stems of flowering trees and shrubs to force indoors for an early preview. Forcing branches is quite simple and very rewarding. There is a good chance that a number of the more easily forced tree and shrub species are already growing in your yard.
Forsythia is a common but favorite shrub for forcing with its cheerful, daffodil yellow blossoms. Cornelian cherry dogwood is another source of golden yellow. Both can be brought into bloom in 2 to 3 weeks. For a softer yellow, try the wiry-leaved Scotch broom. Chinese witch hazel comes in either yellow or orangey-red and its early blooms would be a welcome addition to almost any landscape.

When it comes to early spring color, don’t overlook maples. Japanese and red maple branches combine nicely in arrangements where a touch of red is warranted. The small flowers and new leaves range from crimson to burgundy. Other deciduous trees that may be of interest in arrangements are birch, hickory, poplar and oak. Catkins form in 2 to 3 weeks, mostly in shades of gold, brown and green. Oak catkins may cause allergy symptoms in some individuals, so be forewarned.

Apples and crabapples are also favored for forcing. Flowers may be white, pink or vibrant magenta. Many are delicately scented. Doubles hold their petals longer than singles. They will bloom 2 to 4 weeks after being cut.
Other deciduous shrubs that respond well to forcing include pussy willows, flowering quince, spirea (especially ‘Bridal Wreath’), mock orange, fothergilla, lilacs and honeysuckle. This year I am going to try forcing my Siberian pea shrub.

At least 8 weeks of temperatures below 40 degrees F are generally needed for a plant to meet its dormancy requirements. This usually occurs by the end of January but keep in mind that this was the seventh warmest January in the last 126 years. So better to cut any branches at end of February or so. As a rule of thumb, the closer it is to a plant’s natural flowering period, the less time it takes to force a branch into bloom. Earliest bloomers can be collected in February while later flowering species such as dogwoods, lilacs and apples should not be gathered until March.

One to two foot long branches are a good size for forcing. Select the warmest part of a mild winter day to do your collecting. Cut branches as you would if pruning, making clean angled cuts and cutting back to the main stem or a secondary branch. Take into account the plants’ natural shapes when removing branches to force.

For better water absorption, some advocate splitting the bottom inch or so of the stem. From a personal standpoint I find this more an exercise in blood letting and usually get good results even if I do not slit the stems. After bringing the branches inside, submerge them overnight in a large bucket of warm water. Warm water is more readily absorbed by the cut branches than cold water.

The next day, recut the stems and place in clean vases filled with warm water mixed with a floral preservative. Just the bottoms of the branches need to be set in the water. Change the water every few days recutting the stems each time.

Place the branches in a cool, dimly lighted spot until you notice the buds beginning to swell. At this point, the branches can be moved to a brighter location but not in direct
sunlight. Cooler temperatures will prolong the life of the flowers. If possible, keep the branches at temperatures no higher than 65 degrees F.

A few plants like witch hazel and pussy willow will come into bloom in a week or so but most take from 2 to 6 weeks. When the buds start to color up you can arrange the branches in decorative vases either by themselves, with other types of branches you have forced or with purchased flowers. Make several successions of cuttings for a prolonged supply of arrangement material.

Some branches, most notably pussy willows, will form roots in the vase. If these are desirable plants, pot them up and plant them outside when the weather settles.

Enjoy these early harbingers of spring. The real thing isn’t far behind!

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