



## Forcing Branches for Winter Bouquets

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Spring never seems to come early enough. We can't hasten it along outside but 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. Most likely a number of easily forced tree and shrub species are already growing in your yard.

A favorite shrub for forcing is forsythia with its cheerful, daffodil yellow blooms. 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.



Forced forsythia. Photo by dmp2022

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 are pussy willows, flowering quince, spirea (especially 'Bridal Wreath'), mock orange, fothergilla, lilacs and honeysuckle.

At least 8 weeks of temperatures below 40 degrees F is necessary for a plant to meet its dormancy requirements. This is usually by the end of January. As a rule of thumb, the closer to a plant's natural flowering period, the less time it takes to force into bloom. Earliest bloomers can be collected in February while later flowering species such as dogwoods, lilacs and apples are gathered in March.

One to two foot 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 cuts and cutting back to the main stem or a secondary branch. Take into account the plants' natural shapes when removing branches to force.

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 in the water. Change the water every few days recutting the stems each time.

Place vases in a cool, dimly lighted spot until you notice the buds beginning to swell. At this point move them to a brighter location but out of direct sunlight. Cool 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 flowers bought from a florist. Make several successions of cuttings for a prolonged supply of arrangement material. Enjoy these early harbingers of spring. The real thing won't be far behind!

If you have questions about forcing branches into bloom or on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at [www.ladybug.uconn.edu](http://www.ladybug.uconn.edu) or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.