

Heart of Virginia Master Gardeners
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PRESENTED BY JACKIE FAIRBARN

Bring Spring Early to Indoor Spaces

Bring Spring's cheer early to indoor spaces by forcing blooming shrub and tree branches to bloom days or weeks earlier than they flower outdoors. Take a quick tour around your yard and pick some possibilities.

Good morning everyone. This is Jackie Fairbarns for the Heart of Virginia Master Gardeners Association. Here in the middle of January, we aren't doing much gardening, but I am sure you have noticed that little green are springing up all over the place. The unseasonably warm weather has caused sprouting of many kinds of weeds. Although it is fair to point out that it is also accelerating the sprouting of bulbs and other perennials. In my garden, the Edgeworthia and Quince are showing fat flower buds already, and the pussy willow is also showing signs of swelling buds. Many gardeners delight in bringing an early spring indoors by cutting branches of flowering trees and shrubs and forcing them into bloom weeks before they bloom in the garden.

While it is a little early right now to cut most flowering branches for forcing, cuttings made in mid to late February will usually perform well. Branches from shrubs will bloom in a week or two; those from trees can take up to four to six weeks. The closer it is to the shrub's normal flowering time outdoors, the more quickly the buds will open indoors. Forsythia, quince and pussy willow branches brought in towards the end of February should open up quickly. For apple, dogwood, peach, plum, and lilac, you should wait until about the middle of March before cutting them and bringing them indoors to force for blooms.

After we have had six weeks of very cold weather, you can begin forcing branches. When choosing your branches to cut for indoor use, look for the fat flower buds (leaf buds will be smaller) and always cut the shrub with an eye towards improving the shape of the plant. Choose branches from crowded areas when possible, since you will be removing some of the plant's natural Spring display. Follow good pruning practices when cutting the branches. Cut about a quarter inch above a side bud or branch so that no stub is left behind. Cut the branches in lengths of 6 to 18 inches. These longer branches are easier to use in flower arrangements. Use sharp pruning shears, make your cuts diagonal and flush with a major branch. Ideally, do this in the middle of a mild day when the temperature is above freezing.

In the dormant season, the flow of water through deciduous trees and shrubs slows to nearly half, so to promote forcing, the branches need to absorb all the water they can, as if they are about to break dormancy and soak up spring rains. Once you have the branches indoors, make a one to two inch split in the stem bottom. If it is a woody stem, gently mash the cut ends with a hammer. Place them in tub of water (I use the bathtub for this), let them soak for three or four hours and then move them to a deep container of tepid water. Soaking the branches helps to clean off the bark and also softens up the bud scales, but the soaking is not essential to hasten the bloom. The stems will force just as well if they are placed immediately in a deep container of warm water.

Put the container with the branches in a cool, dimly lit area until the buds start to show some color (temperatures around 60 degrees are ideal). Be sure to change the water a couple of times a week. You can also add a preservative solution to the water. If you have a leftover envelope from the florist, it will work fine. To make your own preservative, use two tablespoons of white vinegar, two tablespoons of sugar, and a half teaspoon of chlorine bleach. This is enough preservative for one quart of water.

Misting the branches daily will hasten the blooming process. When the buds begin to show color, transfer them to a vase and move them into a well lit room. Direct sun should be avoided as it will dry out the branches and shorten the life of the blooms.

While the flowering branches make a spectacular display all by themselves, they can be combined effectively with evergreens and purchased flowers to make interesting arrangements and bouquets. Acuba

and boxwood blend well with many flowering branches. Privet also works nicely and can be forced in about two weeks.

While you are forcing your branches, some of them may root. Pussy willow and forsythia are two that frequently root in the vase. If you want to use these for new plants, remove them from the water when the roots are about half an inch long. Trim the branches so they are six to eight inches long and then pot them up individually. Keep the soil moist until permanent roots are formed, and then plant them outside after the danger of frost is past. It may take several years for the new plants to bloom, so be patient.

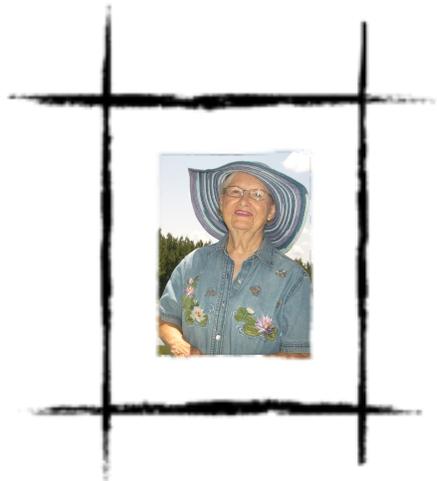
Some shrubs that should bloom within two weeks of cutting in mid to late February (or sooner if our weather continues to be warm and rainy) are forsythia, bridal wreath, flowering quince, spirea, pussy willow, spice bush, shadblow, and witch hazel. Fast blooming trees include Cornelian dogwood, red maple, birch and hickory. If you want to try redbud, it should be cut in March. Consider forcing some honeysuckle to add variety. Apple, pear, plum and peach will also be a treat for the eyes. Though they will take longer (three or four weeks) try your hand at flowering almond, lilac, mock orange, rhododendron, wisteria and crabapple.

If you really adventurous, push on to red twig dogwood, buckeye, flowering dogwood, and magnolia. These will take about five weeks to greet you with their blooms. Just about any dormant flowering shrub or tree can be forced into bloom and there are many options we have not mentioned. Be adventurous; try branches with different blooming times to lengthen the time you have spring blossoms or cut the same variety at different times to stagger the bloom times.

To summarize, as you are walking around the yard or garden on one of the sunny warm days we sometimes have late in January and early in February, take a look at your shrubs and trees. Make a note of the ones that need pruning for size and shape and plan to cut branches from those for indoor forcing. Also note where you might want to add something to your plantings. The Heart of Virginia Master Gardeners remind us that their plant sale will be coming up the first weekend in May and that will be a good time and place to find something special for your garden.

Meanwhile, fellow gardeners, keep on growing!

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Master Gardener Jackie Fairbarns has been gardening for more than 75 years. The retired association executive gardens in Buckingham County, where she has lived since 2010.