

Forcing Spring Flowering Shrubs for Indoor Beauty

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They say it is always darkest before dawn and I am sure I'm not the only one who feels the drab winter is getting a little boring. If you are anxiously anticipating spring's first pop of color, you may want to try forcing some spring flowering shrubs and use them at flower arrangements to bring a little spring cheer into our home.

Select spring-flowering shrubs and trees, such as forsythia, quince, and bridal wreath spirea, because they develop their buds in fall before they go dormant. This is also the reason you typically do not want to prune them until after they are finished flowering in the spring, because you would be removing those flower buds. However, in this case you are intentionally cutting a few branches to remove. This will not be that big of a loss to the outdoor display and at the same time bring a little color inside.

When looking at a branch to cut, you will notice the flower buds have already been developed. Although these buds developed last season, they have to endure about 8 weeks of temperatures below 40 degrees before you can force them to bloom. Later winter, typically we have past 8 weeks and as we get closer to the time they would naturally bloom the buds begin to swell more and more. This makes it easier to force them or "trick" them into thinking it is time to bloom.

Carefully, cut a few branches from the shrub and make sure to cut the branches close to a branch or bud so as not to leave any stubs. Also, while we normally do not prune spring-flowering shrub at this time of year, since you are cutting back some of the branches you want to think about it as if you were pruning it. Therefore, do not simply harvest the branches from one side of the plant, instead take branches from different sides of the shrub to leave an even look overall. Or perhaps, if there is one side that is crowded this is an opportunity to remove some of those branches. Usually you want branches that are 6-18 inches long depending on what container you intend to use. Keep in mind a heavy, taller vase is often better to support large woody stems.

If you want to collect spring blooming fruit trees, then look for branches with several spurs on them. Spurs are these short compact side shoots, which bear the flowers and ultimately bear the fruit on that tree. Keep in mind if you are collecting those branches for flowers, then there is no way those branches are going to produce fruit for you later, but if your tree is a good size that shouldn't be a concern as there would still be ample fruiting branches remaining.

After collecting your branches from the garden, you will want to make a second cut on them. This cut should be at a 45 degree angle creating more surface area for water to be taken up. If you decide to harvest branches when the temperatures are below freezing, after recutting the branches, you will need to immerse the entire branch under cool water for several hours or overnight. You can use either a plastic tub or bathtub. This will gradually acclimate the branches to warmer temperature preventing them from bursting prematurely.

Branches that are cut when temperatures are above freezing do not need to be submerged completely in water. Simply put them in a bucket of warm water (about 110 degrees F) that

covers about 3 inches of the stems. Let this set for 20-30 minutes. If you have a floral preservative, you can add it also to help prolong the life of the branches. If you do not have floral preservative, you can make a solution using some items that you likely have at home - white vinegar, sugar, household chlorine bleach, and water. To 1 quart of water, add 2 tablespoons of white vinegar, 2 tablespoons of sugar, and half a teaspoon of bleach. Mix this up and use as a floral preservative.

After about 20-30 minutes, check the branches. They likely have sucked up a lot of the water and you will need to add more, keeping it at a level of about 3 inches. Until these branches break bud, keep a close eye on the water level to ensure they do not dry out. Keep them in a cool, partially shaded area of the house.

When the buds begin to show color, remove them from the storage bucket and arrange them in a more decorative, watertight container or vase. Make sure the container can hold plenty of water for them and taller, heavier containers tend to work better as they will hold the branches upright and not tip over with the weight of the branches.

Because you are just working with branches there is not much design talent require, you can pretty much just stick them in the container, put the taller ones in the center. Vases of one type of plant look very striking, but to add more color you can also mix branches from different spring-flowering shrubs.

You can place your arrangement in more light, but should still keep them out of direct sunlight. Forcing branches is a great way to add a little color to the end of a long winter.

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