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 **FORCE BLOOMING FLOWERS**

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It will be a while before the spring flowers begin. You can enjoy these flowers weeks earlier though by cutting the branches and force blooming them inside. This article by Extension Horticulturist Jim Midcap tells you how.

Cut branches forced into bloom add sunshine to gloomy winter days. It is not hard to coax many to flower earlier than normal. Spring flowering trees and shrubs can be forced into bloom once low winter temperatures have satisfied their dormancy requirements. Provided with good light, water and proper temperatures, they should burst into flower five days to two weeks after cutting.

Forsythia, quince and pussy willow are easy to force into bloom. Not all shrubs, however, are as easy. Those with late spring blooms are far more difficult. These would include viburnums, lilac and weigela. For best results, cut them close to their regular flowering time.

Cherries and plums are excellent forcing specimens. The old fashioned purple leafed plum forces earlier than cherry.

Many plants can be forced one to two months before their normal flowering time. February is an excellent month for forcing many earlier flowering selections. March works well for the later flowering ones.

The reason we can do this is that of the way spring flowering plants bud and bloom. When winter arrives, the flower buds are already formed on trees and shrubs. A period of dormancy is required before they will bloom. Plants differ in the amount of chilling, moisture, light and warm temperatures necessary to break this dormancy. By February in most years dormancy has been broken. You can then force branches by duplicating spring conditions.

Choose a mild day to cut branches and try to cut them during the warmest part of the day when the buds are filled with moisture. Choose branches that are well budded and have interesting curves. Follow good pruning practices and prune to maintain the natural shape of the plant.

Allow the flowers to develop slowly to fully encourage large blooms with good color. First, mash the bottom inch or two of the stems with a hammer and place in water. Add a floral preservative or sugar with a drop of bleach. Change the water every few days over the forcing period. These practices extend the life of the branches by reducing the bacteria in the water and keep stems unclogged. Water uptake through the stems should keep the branches from drying out unless the room is too warm.

Leave the branches in a cool, dark spot until bud swell begins, then move them into a well lighted area to encourage the flower color to develop. Avoid placing the branches in direct sunlight.

Cool temperatures allow buds to develop slowly and to maintain flower color. When color appears in the bud it is time to arrange the branches in containers. Don't wait until the blossoms are fully opened.

Here are a few shrubs you can force, including when to cut them and how long it will take from cutting to flower. Time to flower may vary based on when cuttings are taken.

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**Shrubs Cutting Time Forcing Time**

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Azalea late January 3-6 weeks

early February depends on species

Crabapple mid-March 2-3 weeks

Flowering Cherry late January 3-4 weeks

mid-March 2-3 weeks

Flowering Dogwood mid-March 2-4 weeks

Flowering Pear late January 4-5 weeks

early February 2-3 weeks

mid-Mar

Willow February 1-2 weeks

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Forcing spring flowering shrubs and trees will allow you to enjoy spring color earlier and for longer. Extend the spring color show and move it inside by force blooming spring flowers.

We have a more complete list of plants to be used for forcing. For more information, call the Extension Office at 542-2020 in Warner Robins or 987-2028 in Perry.