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Forcing Branches

To force branches of your favorite trees and shrubs, select and prune 1-2 year old stems, which usually have the most flower buds. Branches should be 1-2 feet long, and the cut should be flush with a larger branch or the trunk so as not to deform the plant or provide easy access for insects and disease. Try to select branches with many flower buds, but also keep in mind the overall shape of the tree or shrub when making your cuts. Generally, flower buds are fatter and more rounded than leaf buds. If you can't tell which is which, dissect a few buds and look for the flower parts inside.

Bring the cut branches indoors and submerge them overnight in room-temperature water. This helps the branches and buds take up water they need to force the flowers to open. The next morning, recut the bottoms and make inch long vertical slits in the cut ends to help the branches take up water. Place branches in a vase of warm water in a bright room away from heaters and direct sun. In general, the brighter the room, the truer the colors and stronger the fragrance, though blossoms will never look and smell exactly the same as they do outdoors. Depending on the kinds of branches and when you cut them, flowers will begin appearing in a few weeks. The closer to their natural flowering time the branches are forced, the sooner the blooms will appear. Once open, misted flowers can last for a week if kept in a cool room, and some branches with leaves will last up to two weeks.

**Most trees and shrubs force best when pruned about six weeks before their natural bloom time.