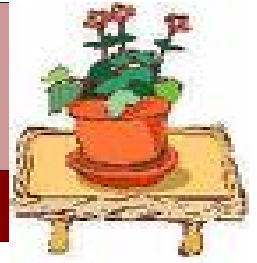


The Children's Corner



By Cathi Cote

This can be a tough time of year for the avid gardener. Garden catalogs have been arriving in droves, wetting everyone's appetite for those first glorious days of "playing" in the dirt. Lists have been made, orders are being placed, and plans are unfolding against a backdrop of grey skies and near-freezing temperatures. Winter isn't done with us yet! Yet, there is a way to jump-start spring indoors with results that the whole family can enjoy. This is the perfect time to force flowering branches.

Besides lifting everyone's spirits, the process of forcing allows close-up observation of woody plants breaking dormancy. Children and adults can witness the emergence of flowers and leaves on different types of woody plants, and note the differences between them. Turn the experience into a mini science experiment. Bring in branches from more than one type of plant, and keep a journal detailing what-happens-when. Take note of how quickly the buds swelled. What emerged first, flowers or leaves? Did all of the branches produce flowers? Why or why not? Snap a digital photo of your branches every few days to capture the changes taking place, and paste them into your journal in chronological order. Later in the season, bring the kids outdoors to see the same plants waking up according to nature's timetable. At this point, they should be able to tell *you* what is going to happen next!

There are a few facts that you should know in order to force branches successfully. To begin with, most deciduous woody shrubs and trees require at least eight weeks of temperatures below 40° F before you attempt to force them into bloom. The closer it is to their normal outdoor bloom time, the quicker the buds will open. Early March is an excellent time to begin the forcing process. Think of cutting branches for forcing as "early pruning" and only cut branches that will enhance the overall look and health of the plant. Look for branches with buds that are plump and healthy. Be aware that round buds usually produce flowers, while narrow, pointed buds will produce leaves. Fruit trees such as apple, pear, and crabapple produce flowers from short fruit spurs rather than buds.

Use a sharp knife or pruners to cut your branches at least a foot long. While not absolutely necessary, completely submerging your branches for a few hours to overnight in a tub of water can help the buds to break dormancy quicker. If outdoor temperatures were still freezing when you cut your branches, start with cold water to limit shock. Gradually move them to lukewarm tap water. To ensure adequate water uptake, cut the base of each branch at an angle, or slice an "x" in the base. Some sources suggest using a hammer or pliers to crush the base of each branch, but beware! You do not want to macerate the stem, just separate some of the long fibers! Make sure that you are using a sturdy vase or container that will hold your branches securely upright (some branches can be deceptively heavy). Display your branches in a warm (65° F) spot that is out of direct sunlight. Change the water in your container every few days to limit bacterial growth, and mist the branches at the same time. Keep in mind that you are attempting to duplicate typical spring weather conditions. Buds allowed to dry out too much may look sickly or fail to open altogether.

If you are working on this project with children, you will want to think carefully about what types of branches you are going to force. Certain shrubs and trees will break dormancy more quickly than others, providing more immediate results. Do not limit your selection to obvious bloomers – witnessing the site of new, fresh leaves breaking bud can be equally rewarding. Forsythia, red maple and pussy willow are practically foolproof candidates that will begin to open in one to two weeks. Fruit tree, redbud, dogwood, and oak branches usually take two to three weeks to open. Rhododendron, azalea, and magnolia branches can take four to six weeks to force, which may be too long to keep a child's interest. If you choose at least one of the quick-bloomers, you can experiment with other types of branches and still keep the whole family happy.

By the time the branches you have forced begin to bloom, true spring weather will be that much closer. Time to do a bit more pruning! Bring in a new batch of branches for a repeat performance. Forcing branches is a fun project that can make that often-awkward transition from winter to spring a little less onerous for the whole family. Best of all, you can do it together.