



# Force Branches for Spring Color

Done carefully, your bouquets can be a part of your annual early pruning.

by Carol Barany for Yakima Valley Master Gardeners

Poppy seems to appreciate the promise of spring, too, as she patiently awaits the Magnolia blooms.

CAROL BARANY PHOTO

**For information on the Yakima County Master Gardeners Program:**

<https://extension.wsu.edu/yakima/home-garden/master-gardeners/>



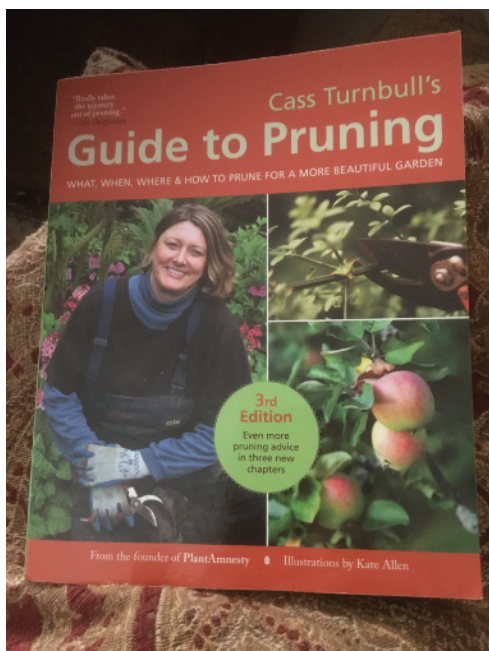
**H**aving flowers to bring into the house for bouquets is what drew me to gardening in the first place. In late winter, more than any other time of year, I crave home-grown flowers..

Who wouldn't want to speed up spring's arrival? It's the perfect time to gather branches from an array of trees and shrubs for early forcing to bloom indoors. Their flower buds were formed last fall before the plants went dormant, and their cold-weather requirements to bloom have been met (a period of at least 8 weeks of temperatures below 40 degrees).

With the branch structure of trees and shrubs so easy to see now, you may already be heading out to do some pruning, so why not collect the trimmings for indoor bouquets?

Every time I pick up a pair of pruners, I hear Cass Turnbull caution, "Just because you can, doesn't mean you should." The esteemed founder of PlantAmnesty spoke at a Master Gardener Spring Symposium several years ago. I was her driver, and en route from the Yakima airport to her hotel, Cass pointed out dozens of





Guide to Pruning by Cass Turnbull is a great resource for all gardeners.

trees and shrubs that were “unhealthy, unpretty, unmanageable, and costly to maintain because of poor pruning.”

It was a revelation. I’d created identical messes in my own garden because of the way I cut branches to force indoors, or later, when they were in bloom.

**WHAT TO PICK:** Branches at least two to three feet long make the most dramatic arrangements at a time when floral drama is just what we need. The forcing process is easiest if you harvest on days when the temperature’s above freezing. Some species will take as little as two weeks to bloom, while others as much as five. The easiest branches to force include forsythia, pussy willow, honeysuckle, crabapple, redbud, magnolia and flowering dogwood.

I’ve learned the hard way that dogwood and magnolia are especially prone to water sprout in response to even a touch of mal-pruning, while forsythia, quince, and bridal wreath spiraea can be forgiving. A list of suggested plants and their forcing times can be found at [www.finegardening.com/article/forcing-branches](http://www.finegardening.com/article/forcing-branches).

**MAKING THE CUTS:** Flower buds are usually fatter than leaf buds. This helps in determining which stems to cut for your bouquet. With fruit trees, branches with lots of side-shoots (spurs) will have the most flowers. Branches removed from crowded areas, or branches that are crossing or rubbing each other, won’t be missed.

Avoid all nonselective heading cuts, which means no whacking the branch to no place in particular. If you do, hidden dormant buds located directly below the cut are stimulated to grow rapidly out into new branches. What you’ll end up with are plenty of unattractive, unhealthy water sprouts that can be difficult to fix with more pruning.

Instead, cut  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch above a side bud or branch, being careful to leave no stubs. Cuts like these channel re-growth through the existing branch or limb. Plants are programmed for survival. Except for deadwood, everything you prune off will be put back on as the plant quickly re-grows to provide enough leaves for

photosynthesis. Proper pruning encourages healthy re-growth in the right places.

**BRINGING THEM INDOORS:** Strip off any buds, twigs, or leaves that will be underwater in the vase. Before placing the branches in containers, re-cutting the stem ends on an angle under water in a sink filled with the hottest water you can tolerate will yield maximum water uptake. If some branches are more than ½ inch in diameter, use sharp pruners to make a few one to two inch long splits in the end of the stem to help draw up water. Some gardeners recommend placing the containers in a cool, dimly lit location until the buds begin to show color, and then bringing them into the rooms where they'll be displayed.

I skip this step and just arrange them immediately. Even tightly closed buds thrill me this time of year, and I enjoy watching them unfurl a little more each day.

Keep the arrangements away from direct sunlight or a direct heat source. The delicate buds will appreciate an occasional misting of water. Use a floral preservative, and be prepared to change the water several times if the branches have a long forcing time. Blooms usually hold for about a week.

This time of year, Turnbull's *Guide to Pruning* is a good read. Or, learn to prune in one of PlantAmnesty's videos posted on YouTube. Doing it right the first time is far easier than having to fix mistakes later.

