Bringing Spring Indoors

Valentine’s Day has me thinking about spring and blooming flowers. Winter has been beautiful for the most part, well to this former North Dakotan the weather has been beautiful, but the winter blues or blahs have started to set in. One of my favorite ways to bring spring inside is using blooming bulbs, but a close second is forcing spring blooming shrub branches inside. The smell of lilacs and fuzzy blooms of pussy willows always brought a smile to my face and chased away the winter blues. Forcing branches to bloom inside can be a simple way to brighten up your indoor space and remind you that spring will soon be here.

Almost any spring blooming tree or shrub can be used in this fashion. Some of the most common are forsythia, red buds, lilacs, willows or pussy willows, dogwood, crabapples, flowering cherry, flowering quince and magnolias are all common flowers that can be forced inside. In order to be forced inside shrubs, much like bulbs, need a period of winter dormancy in order to get the plants to break bud and bloom. Usually this is a period of approximately 6 weeks but that does depend on the shrub as the earlier a plant normally blooms the earlier you can force the branches inside. Forsythia are among the easiest and earliest plants to force inside and will usually bloom 1-3 weeks after you bring them inside while Magnolias or crabapples can take 4-5 weeks to bloom once brought inside.

It is best to prune your shrubs when the temperatures are above freezing because the branches and buds are more pliable and they will transition to the warm temperatures inside the house. Choose branches that are at least 12” long and less than ½” in diameter that have a large number of bloom buds (bloom buds typically are round and fat while leaf buds are long and narrow). If you pruned the shrub last fall after buds were set that shrub will have few blooms and the branches won’t perform well. Remember that any branches you prune from your shrubs could reduce the amount of blooms your shrub will have when it normally blooms. If the plant you are pruning is smaller I would pick branches from the back or sides of the plant and only take a few from one spot.

After you bring the branches inside prune the branches to slightly longer length than you will want them to be when they are blooming and place in a vase or bucket with warm water. Remember that a mixture of lengths of branches will provide the best display. You will need to change the water every couple days to prevent bacteria growth and will need to prune the branches after a water change (that’s why you should leave them longer originally). Place the vase in a warm room out of sunlight and check the branches every few days to see if the buds have broken open. Once the buds have started to open bring the vase into a main room to enjoy! The flowers will last longest in cooler temperatures out of the direct sunlight but you can expect the blooms to last approximately a week. If the branch hasn’t broken bud within 5 weeks of being brought inside it’s best to discard it. It was probably too early for that species to be forced inside.

Forcing flowering shrubs inside is a fun activity to do with kids, grandkids or even just for yourself. If doing this with kids, you could turn it into a science experiment and have them guess which type of shrub will bloom first. This activity is easy but produces a big impact, especially if you are suffering from the winter blues. Remember to change the water often and discard the branches when they are done blooming. Just a reminder if you were lucky enough to receive flowers for Valentine’s day, be sure to trim the ends and change the water frequently to keep the blooms lasting. Happy Growing!!

Reminders-

- During warm spells this winter, be sure to water newly planted trees and shrubs in your landscape. Even trees that have been planted in the last 2-3 years will benefit from some watering during the winter. An easy method of watering is to take a 5-gallon bucket, drill a 1/8” hole in the bottom and place the full bucket near your tree to let the water drip out. After it
empties move it to the other side of the tree and fill it again. Be sure to try to water at least 12" into the soil if you are using a sprinkler system. Deeper watering is more important than frequent watering to encourage the new root system to grow.

- We are approaching the time to spray for Peach Leaf Curl. Usually we can wait till March to spray for this disease, however if we have an extended warm period in February, the peach buds can begin to swell and lead to spraying in Late February. Peach leaf curl is a disease that results in puckered, swollen and distorted leaves. The disease can weaken tree due to leaf drop in the spring, however it is easy to control with a timely application of fungicides. The fungicide needs to be applied before the buds swell so keep an eye on those temperatures. Only spray when the temperatures are above 40 degrees. There are several fungicides labeled for this disease including chlorothalonil (Ortho Garden Disease Control, Fertilome Broad Spectrum Fungicide, GardenTech Fungicide Disease Control and Daconil). Thoroughly cover the entire tree during application. Note that it is much easier to achieve good spray coverage if the tree is pruned before spraying.

Upcoming Events

- **March 2, 2022: Landscape Design 101**
  Designing a new flower bed or revamping a current one can intimidate any gardener. With just a few simple design principles, become more confident in choosing plants for these areas. Join Travis Carmichael, Lyon County Horticulture Extension Agent, as he discusses design principles, including the importance of planting in groups, planning for mature size, and bringing year-round color to the landscape. For more information or to register click here.

- **March 10, 2022- Vegetable Gardening in Small Spaces**
  Are you interested in growing your own vegetables but live in an apartment, have a shady back yard or have a physical limitation that prevents you from gardening in the ground? Container vegetable gardening is a great way to grow your own vegetables on your window sill, patio, porch or even your front step. Join us to learn how to grow your own tomatoes, corn, beans and potatoes in containers or raised beds! Please register so we have enough handouts and space for everyone!