

## WOODSY ALTERNATIVES FOR WEDDING SEASON

> As another wedding season dawns, floral designers everywhere look forward to the brisk business and the chance to stretch their creative muscles. Eager to stand out from the crowd? Inspiration may be found in your own back yard: spring flowering branches.

### A New Accent on a Classic Theme

Consider the classic, standard selection of wedding flowers, such as roses, tulips, carnations, chrysanthemums and lilies. These blooms have earned their status for a reason: They show well. They are in demand. Designers know how they develop and behave, and they know how to work with them.

As in every other walk of life, however, there will be people — brides, in this case — who don't want the classic standard. They crave something different, as vaguely defined in bridal magazines and lifestyle shows on cable TV. And "different" may be the only direction they offer a beleaguered florist. Flowering branches can provide an alternative springtime floral accent to centerpieces and room décor.

### Abundant in Season

Flowering branches are available beginning in early spring across wide swaths of the Northern Hemisphere. They grow on a variety of trees and shrubs and offer a rainbow of colors to accent any floral theme. Depending on which plants grow in your region, you may choose from the snowy white of pussy willow or ser-

viceberry; the range of pinks offered by apple, cherry or dogwood; the royal lavender of wisteria; the deep red of quince; the sunny yellow of forsythia; or the bold, surprising chartreuse of witch hazel.

Many floral wholesalers offer regional varieties of flowering branches. Enterprising floral designers, however, often try their luck with specimens growing wild in wooded lots, or the domesticated examples in their own back yards and landscape beds!

If you plan to harvest your own branches, follow some general timing guidelines based on the work of woody ornamentals expert Janet Bachmann.

- Forsythia, quince, apple, cherry: Cut when buds are very tight
- Lilac, rhododendron, *Kalmia*, deutzia, camellia, witch hazel, hibiscus, *Mahonia*, spirea, *Pieris*, viburnum: Cut when buds are starting to open
- Acacia, hydrangea, leonotis, *Hypericum*, *Cornus*, *Erica*: Cut when buds are nearly open

If you can, try to gather or purchase some "practice" branches a couple of weeks in advance to study how and when they open.

### Forcing Buds to Open

When working with spring-forced branches, allow time for the buds to hydrate and open. Here are some guidelines for forcing:

- To help branches adjust to warmer temperatures, harvest when outdoor temperatures are above freezing

- Place branches in warm water (100 to 110 F) containing a commercial flower food
- Avoid using water treated with softeners
- Begin forcing at 50 F for approximately two weeks to prevent buds from blowing open
- Move to 75 F to accelerate opening; keep at 50 F to slow opening; move to 35 F cooler to stop opening

Choose an area with good light, but not direct sunlight, as intense sun may burn the buds and branches. When you reach a stage when blooms are ready to open, place branches in the cooler to hold them at that stage.

Ideally, with sufficient time and staff, you should place branches in a commercial hydrating treatment for two to three hours, followed by a bucket with flower food. In early spring, the flowers on forsythia or quince, for example, emerge before the leaves. Thus the branches are quite dependent on energy provided by the sugar in commercial flower food.

As with any flower in storage, follow proper sanitation protocols (find a run-down at [safnow.org/moreonline](http://safnow.org/moreonline)), and change your flower food solution regularly to keep water clean and promote adequate uptake.

### Natural Accents

The words "local" and "natural" are popular among today's brides, but these terms can be hard to define. Well, what could be more rustic, natural and local than fresh-cut branches harvested from a nearby field or woods?

Spring flowering branches can be a value-added proposition for your business, something beyond the typical floral offering — and one that costs very little for you to acquire.

This wedding season, do something original and unexpected that inspires you, surprises your brides, and sets you apart from other designers. 🌸

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