

It's OK to Fool Mother Nature
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Many of us remember the old Chiffon margarine television commercials where Mother Nature is surrounded by forest critters. Mother Nature tastes the margarine and declares "it's not nice to fool Mother Nature" and lightning strikes and thunder booms. I say we can fool Mother Nature and the results are much better than presented in the Chiffon commercial.

Forcing spring bloom is one way a gardener can experience springtime indoors during the months of February and March, thus fooling Mother Nature. Forcing is the process where plants are "forced" to bloom when they would not normally do so. Spring flowering bulbs can be forced to produce tulips, daffodils, hyacinths, or crocus. Many of us have seen this when we visit garden centers or conservatories. Before a spring flowering bulb can bloom it must first undergo a vernalization period. This is a cold treatment of about 1,200 hours of below freezing temperatures. Once this cold treatment has been supplied the bulbs are ready to bloom. More cold after the vernalization only keeps the bulb from growing. Bringing pre-treated bulbs indoors will force growth and flowers to be produced. Woody plants can be forced to bloom indoors without the additional work that bulbs require.

Branches of many woody plants can be cut in February and March brought indoors for an awesome spring display. Several species force well including; forsythia, dogwood, Bradford pear, serviceberry, poplar, red maple, cherry, pussy willow, apple and crabapple. The first step is to select stems with good strong flower buds. Flower buds are typically larger than vegetative buds. Cut branches at least twelve inches long. Branches with a diameter of less than a half inch work best. The next step is to bring the branches indoors and get them warmed up and kept moist. Re-cut the branches underwater and soak in lukewarm water overnight. Place in a vase but make sure you change the water weekly as bacteria will start to grow and might plug up the xylem tissues blocking the flow of water into the branches. Mist the buds often to keep them from drying out. Place the vase in indirect light and you should see foliage and/or flowers in about two to four weeks. Using these simple techniques gardeners can enjoy some fresh flowers that normally would not be seen until April or May. Experiment with different species and see what happens.

During the long winter months most gardeners are thinking about the future. They are planning, planting seeds indoors, designing new gardens, or just wishing they could have some wonderful spring flowers to see, touch, and smell. Some gardeners get ready for spring by attending one or more of many educational opportunities on gardening. Check with your local Extension office to find out where and when some of these opportunities are being held.

For additional information on forcing feel free to call me at 605-394-2188 or email to ricky.abrahamson@sdstate.edu. Be sure to check out our website at www.co.pennington.sd.us/extension/extsvc.html for up to date educational offerings and additional information.