

# WOODY ORNAMENTALS FOR CUT FLOWER GROWERS

CURRENT TOPIC

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## INTRODUCTION

“Woody cuts” or “woodies” come from perennial shrubs, trees, or woody vines. Flowering branches, foliage, fruits, pods, and stems are gaining wide use in creative floral design. If you are a cut-flower grower, woody ornamentals can be some of the best plants for extending your season and filling out your bouquets.

In addition to season extension, woody ornamentals have a number of other advantages. They generally have few pest problems and can be grown on land unsuited for other crops. Once established, these perennials generally don’t require as much care as annuals. They can serve as attractive landscape plants, as habitat for beneficial insects and birds, and as windbreaks.

Disadvantages include higher establishment costs and a wait of a year or more for the first harvest. In addition, although many cut-flower growers are already growing woodies, there is little information about the best cultivars, harvest times, postharvest treatment, pricing, and markets.



From top to bottom: *Nandina domestica*; *Magnolia stellata*; *chrysanthemiflora*; *Prunus mume* rose bud.

## GETTING STARTED

Because you will be establishing perennials, weed management will be a special concern. You can decrease weed problems by covering the planting bed with landscape fabric, and then covering the fabric with an organic mulch such as wood chips.

Fertilizers and soil amendments should be worked into the soil before planting. This is especially true for phosphorus, which is not very mobile in the soil. Fertility requirements for most woodies are similar to those for orchard trees and shrubs, but additional phosphorus helps to produce longer shoots.

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Irrigation is especially important at planting time and when the plants are small. As plants become established, irrigation may no longer be necessary.

If you want your woody ornamentals to serve as a windbreak or as part of your landscape design, space them according to recommendations for those purposes. However, if you are planting them only to make cuttings, tight spacing is better. This causes stems to grow long and straight. For most woody cuts, plants are set 2–6 feet apart within rows. But be sure to leave enough space *between* rows for field operations, such as mowing a walkway cover-crop or harvesting branches.



Field planting of hollies

Grower Elizabeth Dean found that double rows of plants staggered on 4- to 6-foot beds with 6- to 8-foot sod paths between the beds accommodate her mowing equipment (1).

Pruning to encourage growth of many long stems differs from pruning for a landscape specimen. In a typical plant, the dominant apical or tip bud prevents the development of the dormant buds or side shoots. If you remove the tip bud by pruning or pinching, other buds on the stem will develop. If you prune the apical bud from the plant when it is small, it will branch low to the ground and produce long, usable stems. If you prune a larger plant, you must cut it back hard to get a flush of long stems. A general rule when harvesting woody ornamentals is to leave at least a third of the foliage on the plant when you cut. Once the plants have gone dormant, however, some species, such as *Buddleia* and *Caryopteris*, can be cut to the ground (2).

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## WHAT TO PLANT

When selecting plants to grow for woody cuts, look for species that:

- Have the ability to grow well in your climate, and regrow rapidly after severe and frequent pruning.
- Produce numerous stems borne over a long period of time.
- Produce stems at least 18" long (upscale florists like long stems).
- Retain flowers, berries, or foliage well
- Have a long vase life.
- Produce harvestable branches early in the plant's life.
- Extend your season from forced flowers (forsythia, fruit trees) in the spring; to berries (beautyberry, bittersweet) or bright foliage (oak) in the fall; to red berries and/or green foliage (hollies, pine, juniper, magnolia) for Christmas.



Forsythia (*Forsythia x intermedia*)  
Photo by Janet Bachmann

Boxwood, dogwood, forsythia, holly, hydrangea, jasmine, lilac, pussy willow, and corkscrew willow have long been popular in the floral trade. The table *Woody Ornamentals Suitable for Cutting* (p. 5–8) lists other possible choices. Consider growing a mix of best-sellers and unusual cuts.

## HARVEST AND POSTHARVEST

The proper time of harvest for flowering branches varies. Forsythia, quince, and fruit blossoms are best cut when the buds are very tight; color need not be showing. Lilac, rhododendron, *Kalmia*, deutzia, camellia, witch hazel, hibiscus, *Mahonia*, spirea, *Pieris*, and viburnum are among those that should be cut just as they are starting to open. The suggested time to cut butterfly bush is when half the flowers on the inflorescence are open but before the open flowers have started to fade. Acacia, hydrangea, leonotis, *Hypericum*, *Cornus*, and *Erica* species should be cut when nearly or fully open (3).

Forcing blossoms is a way to have an early supply of flowers that would normally bloom later in the season. It also allows you to have flowers available on specific dates for special events.

Many ornamental trees and shrubs set their flower buds during the summer for bloom the following spring, go dormant in winter, and come out of dormancy when exposed to warmth and moisture. Late winter, the best time to prune deciduous trees and shrubs, is also the best time to cut branches for forcing.



Cut pussy willow, forced



Spring Bouquet (*Viburnum tinus*)

Cut branches for forcing when the outside temperature is above freezing – they will be more pliable and make a better transition from cold outdoor temperatures to warmer indoor temperatures. Set the branches in buckets of warm (100° to 110°F) water with a floral preservative dissolved in it. Start forcing at 50°F; higher temperatures at the start will blast the buds. After a couple of weeks, you can speed up the time to flowering by moving the buds to a room as warm as 75°F, keep it slow at 50°F, or halt it by placing the branches in cold storage at 35°F (4).

Pussy willow, flowering quince, forsythia, and fruit blossoms are among the most common woody plants cut for forcing. Suitable branches can be cut from other willows, filberts, beeches, birches, fothergillas, witch hazels, eastern redbud, lilacs, magnolias, rhododendrons, flowering quinces, and red maple (5).



Purple beautyberry (*Callicarpa dichotoma*)

More information on forcing can be found in the book *Floriculture* by John Dole (6). He gives details on lilac and forsythia, two species whose production and forcing requirements are well documented.

Branches that are chosen for their beauty simply as bare branches – such as redbud and yellowtwig dogwood – are cut when dormant. The dogwood stems will be green during the summer, but change color during cold winter weather. Do not put the cut

stems into water, but store them dry. They will last for months.

Branches chosen for their ornamental fruits are generally cut after the fruits are mature. Bittersweet should be cut before its pods open; the vines are stored dry. American beautyberry should be cut when mid-stem berries are colored. Green fruits do not color after harvest (7).

## MARKETING CHANNELS

Lane Greer and John M. Dole of North Carolina State University offer these comments:

“For the most part, the same marketing channels used by cut-flower growers are used by woody-cut growers. These include farmers’ markets, pick-your-own, and retail florists. However, there are some differences. Many farmers’ markets and most pick-your-own establishments are closed from late fall to early spring, which is a great time for harvesting and selling many woody cuts such as pussy willow. A few retail florists may not be interested in woody cuts. Working with berried plants like *Callicarpa*, for instance, can be challenging. Those florists who tend to create original designs will demand new flowers, different colored stems, and unusual plants to lend their work a taste of the uncommon.”



## RESOURCES

Lynn Byczynski's excellent book *The Flower Farmer* (2) has a chapter devoted to woody ornamentals. Byczynski also publishes the popular monthly journal *Growing for Market*. This publication is not targeted specifically toward flower growers, but it usually has at least one article on field-grown cut flowers.

Anyone who is considering growing cut flowers (woody or otherwise) should invest in a copy of Allan Armitage's book *Specialty Cut Flowers* (8). Armitage devotes a section to woody cuts, in which he describes production and handling as well as propagation techniques, field culture, greenhouse production, and postharvest techniques.

Other growers are another good source of information. The Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers (ASCFG) (9) enables growers to share production and marketing information with each other. The ASCFG produces a membership directory that contains information about individual growers and the varieties of flowers they produce. The directory is free to ASCFG members and is for sale to non-members. Other member benefits include a quarterly newsletter and a listserv where members share questions and answers of all kinds. The ASCFG also hosts an annual conference. The 2002 conference, September 18–21 in Middleton, Wisconsin, will include special sessions on woody ornamentals.

The *American Nurseryman* (10) includes advertisements for many plant sources. It also advertises many useful books, and often has articles on woody ornamentals that are suitable for cuts.



Holly berries

### Woody Ornamentals Suitable for Cutting

Botanical Name	Common Name	Comments
<i>Abelia chinensis</i>		
<i>Abeliophyllum distichum</i>	White forsythia	Abundant small white flowers, delicate fragrance.
<i>Acacia</i> spp.		
<i>Acer rubrum</i>	Red maple	Suitable for forcing.
<i>Amorpha canescens</i>	Leadplant amorpha	
<i>Aronia arbutifolia</i>	Red chokeberry	
<i>Aucuba japonica</i>	Japanese aucuba	
<i>Betula papyrifera</i>	Birch	Often used as whole trees at 8-10' (silk leaves).
<i>Buddleia davidii</i>	Butterfly bush	Numerous cultivars with flowers in shades of purple, pink, white.
<i>Buddleia globosa</i>	Orange butterfly bush	Bright yellow, fragrant flowers.
<i>Buddleia weyeriana</i>		Hybrid with yellow to yellow-orange flowers. 'Sun Gold' has long vase life.
<i>Buxus</i> spp.	Boxwood	Long-lasting foliage. Variegated and green cultivars.

<i>Callicarpa americana</i>	American beautyberry	Grown for its metallic purple berries. Zones 6–10. Must be defoliated.
<i>Callicarpa bodinieri</i>	Bodinieri beautyberry	Grown for its berries. Must be defoliated.
<i>Callicarpa dichotoma</i>	Purple beautyberry	Grown for its berries. Profusion is recommended cultivar. Must be defoliated. Smaller fruit than <i>C. americana</i> . Zones 5–8.
<i>Calluna vulgaris</i>	Heather	Many cultivars.
<i>Calycanthus floridus</i>	Common sweetshrub	Cultivar: Athens.
<i>Caryopteris clandonensis</i>	Bluebeard	Will provide cuts in first year. Blue flowers produced in late summer.
<i>Celastrus scandens</i>	American bittersweet	Vines need trellis. Cut before fruits open.
<i>Cercis canadensis</i>	Eastern redbud	Cut for flowers when buds are tight.
<i>Cercis chinensis</i>	Chinese redbud	
<i>Chaenomeles speciosa</i>	Flowering quince	Flowers in early spring, suitable for forcing.
<i>Chaenomeles japonica</i>	Japanese flowering quince	
<i>Chimonanthus praecox</i>	Fragrant wintersweet	Fragrant flowers in winter.
<i>Chionanthis retusus</i>	Chinese fringetree	
<i>Clematis</i> spp.	Clematis	Cut flowers can last 7–10 days.
<i>Clethra alnifolia</i>	Summersweet clethra	Fragrant flowers in summer.
<i>Cornus alba</i>	Tatarian dogwood	Stems of cultivar Bud's Yellow turn yellow in cold weather. For best color, cut stems back hard every year.
<i>Cornus florida</i>	Flowering dogwood	Spring flowers; cut when open.
<i>Cornus sanguinea</i>	Dogwood	Dried cut stems last for months.
<i>Cornus sericia</i>	Redtwig dogwood	Grown for red stems. Cut in fall or winter and store dry.
<i>Corylopsis spicata</i>	Winterhazel	Pale yellow flowers are produced in early spring.
<i>Corylus avellana</i>	European filbert	Cultivar: Contorta; grown for its stems.
<i>Cotinus coggygria</i>	European smoketree	Cultivari: Velvet Cloak. Purple foliage has a good vase life.
<i>Cotinus obovatus</i>	American smoketree	
<i>Cyrilla racemiflora</i>	Swamp cyrilla	Also called leatherwood. Beautiful foliage, fragrant white flowers.
<i>Cytisus</i> spp.	Scotch broom	Many cultivars.
<i>Danae racemosa</i>	Alexandrian laurel	Foliage is excellent for cut branches. Zones 8 and 9.
<i>Daphne burkwoodii</i>	Burkwood daphne	Creamy to pinkish tinged, fragrant flowers.
<i>Daphne genkwa</i>	Lilac daphne	Flowers are lilac-colored and borne along entire length of stem, not fragrant.
<i>Daphne odora</i>	Fragrant daphne	Also called winter daphne; fragrant early spring flowers. Stems are very short.
<i>Deutzia elegantissima</i>	Elegant deutzia	
<i>Eleagnus</i> spp.		Species include Silverberry, Autumn olive. Good foliage, fragrant flowers.
<i>Eleagnus x ebbingii</i>		Cultivar Gilt Edge has extra-showy foliage.
<i>Erica</i> spp.	Heaths	

<i>Euonymus alata</i>	Winged euonymus	Interesting stems with rich-brown corky ridges.
<i>Euonymus atropurpurea</i>	Wahoo	Abundant attractive fruits.
<i>Forsythia x intermedia</i>	Forsythia	Yellow flowers in early spring, suitable for forcing. Lynwood Gold has more stems than other cultivars.
<i>Fothergilla gardenii</i>	Dwarf fothergilla	
<i>Hamamelis mollis</i>	Chinese witchhazel	
<i>Hamamelis vernalis</i>	Vernal witchhazel	Extremely early spring blossoms. Fragrant.
<i>Hamamelis virginiana</i>	Common witchhazel	Late fall blossoms.
<i>Hydrangea</i> spp.	Hydrangea	Flowers in blue, pink, white depending on soil acidity. Also used as dried flowers.
<i>Hypericum androseum</i>	St. Johnswort	Cultivars: Albury Purple, Excellent Flair.
<i>Hypericum buckleyi</i>	Blueridge St. Johnswort	
<i>Hypericum frondosum</i>	Golden St. Johnswort	Summer bloomers with smooth bluish-green foliage.
<i>Hypericum 'Hidcote'</i>		Interesting seed capsules in fall, useful in dried arrangements.
<i>Hypericum prolificum</i>	Shrubby St. Johnswort	Interesting seed capsules in fall, useful in dried arrangements.
<i>Ilex decidua</i>	Possumhaw	Deciduous, harvest when berries are mature.
<i>Ilex serrata</i>	Japanese winterberry	Deciduous, harvest when berries are mature.
<i>Ilex veticillata</i>	Winterberry	Deciduous, harvest when berries are mature.
<i>Itea virginica</i>	Virginia sweetspire	
<i>Jasminum mesnyi</i>	Primrose jasmine	
<i>Kerria japonica</i>		Cultivar Picta has handsome white-edged leaves.
<i>Koelreuteria bipinnata</i>	Goldenraintree	Fruits collected in pink stage and dried last for years.
<i>Leptospermum scoparium</i>	Broom teatree	Evergreen foliage.
<i>Lonicera fragrantissima</i>	Winter honeysuckle	Fragrant early-spring flowers.
<i>Lonicera x heckrottii</i>	Goldflame honeysuckle	Vine; carmine flower buds change color as they open.
<i>Lonicera sempervirens</i>	Trumpet honeysuckle	Cultivars with yellow, orange, or red flowers.
<i>Loropetulum chinense</i>	Chinese witchhazel	
<i>Magnolia grandiflora</i>	Southern magnolia	Large, creamy white, fragrant flowers; evergreen foliage.
<i>Magnolia stellata</i>	Star magnolia	Suitable for forcing.
<i>Malus</i> spp.	Flowering crabapple	Suitable for forcing.
<i>Michelia figo</i>	Banana shrub	Adapted to Coastal Plain; very fragrant flowers.
<i>Myrica cerifera</i>	Wax myrtle	Evergreen foliage. Fragrant.
<i>Myrica pensylvanica</i>	Northern bayberry	Aromatic leaves; gray fruits in winter.
<i>Nandina domestica</i>	Heavenly bamboo	Red berries in fall, white flowers early summer, attractive foliage.
<i>Oxydendron arboreum</i>	Sourwood	Fragrant white flowers early summer.
<i>Philadelphus coronarius</i>	Mock orange	Fragrant white flowers late spring.
<i>Physocarpus 'Diablo'</i>	Ninebark	Deep maroon leaves all summer.
<i>Pittosporum tobira</i>	Japanese pittosporum	Fragrant flowers late spring, lustrous foliage year-round. Zones 8–10.
<i>Poncirus trifoliata</i>	Hardy orange	Grown for thorny stems. Zones 6–9.

<i>Prunus</i> spp.	Flowering almonds, plums, cherries, apricots	Suitable for forcing.
<i>Pyracantha coccinea</i>	Scarlet firethorn	Attractive fruit.
<i>Pyrus</i> spp.	Pears	Suitable for forcing.
<i>Rhododendron</i> spp.		
<i>Rosa</i> spp.	Rose	Can be grown specifically for their hips to be cut in fall.
<i>Salix alba</i>	White willow	Grown for golden stems and red-orange twigs.
<i>Salix caprea</i>	Florist's willow	Grown for catkins.
<i>Salix discolor</i>	Pussy willow	Grown for catkins.
<i>Salix gracilistyla</i>	Rosegold pussy willow	Grown for catkins.
<i>Salix irrorata</i>	Blue stem willow	
<i>Salix matsudana</i>	Curly willow	Grown for interesting stems.
<i>Salix sachalinensis</i>	Japanese fantail willow	Cultivar Sekka grown for fantailed stems.
<i>Skimmia japonica</i>	Skimmia	Evergreen, aromatic leaves.
<i>Skimmia laureola</i>	Skimmia	Evergreen foliage, sweet-scented creamy green flowers.
<i>Spiraea prunifolia</i>	Spiraea	
<i>Spiraea</i> spp.	Spiraea	Many species and cultivars.
<i>Stachyurus praecox</i>		Long chains of pale yellow flowers borne in spring. Very interesting look.
<i>Symphoricarpos alba</i>	Common snowberry	White, berry-like fruits are ornamental, but often discolored.
<i>Symplocos paniculata</i>	Sapphireberry	Fragrant, creamy white flowers in early summer. Zones 4–8.
<i>Syringa</i> spp.	Lilac	Cut for flowers, strip leaves.
<i>Ulmus alata</i>	Winged elm	Grown for stems with corky wings. Store dry.
<i>Viburnum</i> spp.	Viburnums, snowball	Many species and cultivars grown for flowers, leaves, and fruits.
<i>Vitex</i> spp.	Chastetree	Flowers range from lilac and lavender through pink and white.
<i>Weigela florida</i>	Weigela	Many cultivars grown for flowers.

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CT 163