

HOUSE RULES

t h e p o d c a s t

Episode 7: Bring a Branch Inside: In Defense of Foraging

I'm Myquillyn Smith and this is House Rules:
Welcome to Episode 7

We had just sat down for dinner with our three young boys. We were in the breakfast room of our rental house. If you've ever lived in a rental, you understand the unique limitations you face without the luxury of being able to change the wall color, flooring or lighting. This house, although nice, was not my style so it was a challenge to make it feel homey.

But I happened to look up and capture a glimpse of our home that evening through the looking glass. Literally. I had a mirror on the wall in the hall that I could just see from a certain angle at the table. Something about seeing our home reflected in reverse allowed me to see it with fresh eyes, as if for the first time. I realized that our home looked warm. It looked inviting and homey. We had a few lamps lit that gave a warm welcoming light, dinner was smelling delicious and I had just clipped a big huge leafy branch from a tree in the back yard that was worth triple his weight in decorating impact.

I caught myself glancing up at the mirror multiple times during dinner and then next day, I sat back at the seat at the table purposely so I could take in the same view. Our home had changed over the months and seeing it through the mirror reminded me that the work I was doing to make those changes counted. Everything from adding large pieces, like foundational furniture, to the small finishing touches that made our rental house feel like home.

By the end of this episode, you'll have one more tool in your cute tool chest full of home decor ideas to implement right now. This tip is so simple, some of you are going to roll your eyes.

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I'm recording this episode in Autumn and we are at the height of branch foraging season.

Going outside with a pair of scissors or even my bare hands to break off a few branches of something leafy, blooming, or beautifully dried has been a way for me to add beauty to every single one of our 15 homes over the past, well, almost 30 years. There were times in my adult life that I had a budget of ZERO, but I desperately longed to make my home look better, fresher, more me and more in keeping with the season. Cutting, breaking, foraging branches, weeds and seed pods from the outdoors gave me options. It allowed me to be creative and at times it was the one easy thing I could do to make a difference or a change in my home. I'm still doing it to this very day.

We've lived in apartments, tiny garages behind the real house, rentals, suburban builder grade homes with lots of land, and homes with almost no property. No matter where we lived I was able to find a way to bring some cuttings in from outside.

I didn't say it was always simple, or that I had a beautiful blooming bush right outside my backdoor – that would be lovely. But I did say I always found a way to bring the outside in, in the form of branches and cuttings because it's worth the trouble and every time I bring something in I'm once again surprised at the impact that it has. That's what I hope to convince you of today.

Many of you have been doing this yourselves for as long as you can remember. Maybe your mom went outside and cut things from the backyard and brought them in, it's just normal to you and you are nodding right along as you look over your shoulder at the most recent yard cutting that you've brought inside. People have been cutting things from outside and bringing them in throughout the ages. I know I've seen Ma on an episode from Little House on the Prairie cut an armload of flowers, pile them in her apron or a pretty basket and put them in a pitcher full of water on her mantle. That pretty much proves my point, right?

However, whenever I mention yard cuttings I get two reactions. First, people who share what they most recently cut or gathered and what room they're enjoying it. And then, there's another kind of person whose first reaction is to question and wonder how risky it is to bring something as wild as a tree branch. They have lots of worries about what products I use in order to one hundred percent guarantee that I'm not bringing in any creepy crawly insects.

I get it, no one wants to bring in a pregnant spider. But what I don't understand is that every time I mention cutting a big gorgeous magnolia branch, some people are all the sudden so sure I'm bringing Charlotte, her web and all of her sisters inside. But then you scroll down one image on Instagram and there's Erin from Floret in her beautiful garden. She's cutting three dozen dahlias and not one person in her seven hundred comments is concerned and asking for tips about how not to bring spiders or insects in the house.

It's a double standard and, guys, I'm calling it out.

I don't really believe that anyone is purposely being disingenuous, **I just think it's human nature to want to come up with a good excuse of maybe why we can't try something new. That way we don't have to try at all.**

I think if people were so worried about bringing little bugs inside, they would have question after question on every flower and vegetable gardener's posts about how not to bring in insects. It would be their top concern. Gardeners would be addressing this over and over again all of the flower garden accounts that we follow. But that's not the case. When someone cuts an armload of herbs, roses, hydrangeas or peonies – which are known for attracting ants – close to no one is asking or is overly concerned that they'll be inviting all sorts of insects into their home and how risky and dangerous and out of the question it is for them to be bringing the dangerous outside in.

We've decided that cut garden flowers are worth the risk. They are worth the effort. We all know that if we are worried about spiders on flowers we'll shake them, we'll spray them off with the hose or maybe we'll let them sit in the sink for an hour while we keep an eye on them.

We all have a threshold for care. You are allowed to have yours and I'm allowed to have mine. And for me, having free greens of some sort in my house year round is worth the little possibility of bringing in a few insects from time to time. I've probably brought more greens in than anyone you know and I can only remember a handful of times that a little insect has come in with it. I think our dog has caused more of an insect problem than foraging branches ever has.

To me, the beauty that yard cuttings add is worth so much more than the slight possibility that a little insect could come inside. What a tiny price to pay for getting free greens in the form of foraged branches! If you're truly worried, you can shake off your branches, you can spray them with the hose and let them sit out to dry in the sun – did you know that your yard cuttings actually get wet? They've been rained on until you decide to bring them. Or, like flowers, you can set them in the sink for a little while and just keep an eye on them.

Ok, I'm going to get off my high horse, thank you for hearing me out. Let me get out of Nellie Olsen mode and come back down to earth and talk about WHY of foraged finds.

First of all, if you are in a place right now where you can literally flip through some styled images of homes, just do that while I'm talking. Look through Pinterest, a shelter magazine or decorating book, maybe one of your favorite home decorators on Instagram. I want you to pay attention to the greens. Now, greens are what I call any type of plants. It could be living, pretend, faux or even dried. It could take the form of an actual plant in a pot that's living and breathing, a pretend plant, grocery store or garden flowers or pretend or cut flowers. Maybe it's some sort of branch in your yard or a cutting that needs to be put in water. Maybe a green is something that was living and it's now dried beautifully or preserved. I'm calling all of those things greens. So I want you to take note of the greens represented in every photo and remember not all "greens" are required to be the color green. That's why I think autumn is such

a great time for greens, because in the summer, winter, spring, if I cut a branch full of evergreen or green leaves or flowers I'll add them to a vase with water. But in the fall, I'm usually gravitating to branches where the leaves are dried but they're still clinging on, or there's dried seed pods or grasses – no water needed!

Ok, so back to our little practice - while I was writing this, I did exactly what I asked you. So just I went to McGee and Co's Instagram page. I scrolled through photos for about a minute – maybe I saw about 100 photos or so – and I would guess that over 90% had some sort of greens showing up in the photo. I wish I could remember where I first heard this, but years ago someone shared a tip that from anyplace in your home, you should always be able to see three greens. Visible. It sounds like a lot, but when I walked around my house, I noticed that you pretty much could see three greens from anywhere, and my house doesn't feel overly planty, or like a safari or anything.

The point is that greens add actual life to a room and are a vital part of a finished home My home needs greens, your home needs greens of some sort, and if you don't believe me, refer to your favorite show, decorating book or the pinterest image that you saved and imagine what those rooms would look like if you removed the greens.

This practice might lead you to realize that you need more greens in your house. Well, welcome to the club. Do you know the easiest way to baby step yourself to knowing where and how to add greens? Well, that's free cuttings from the great outdoors.

So, instead of going to your local plant shop and buying a big huge expensive gorgeous tropical plant (I hope you do that someday, and if you do - congratulations!). But first, you get to practice where your home could most use greens by cutting some things from outside. Cut greens short in fat bunches, cut greens four times longer than you think you might need them and then bring them inside and realize, "Oh my gosh, I should have cut it twice as long!" You can experiment with hardly any risk when you cut free things from outside! It's so fun to learn about the power of greens without having to invest in a bunch of plants that you have to keep alive. My cuttings from outside usually last a week or two and then I get to change it up.

Maybe you don't currently have a yard. I've been there, and it didn't stop me. When we lived in an apartment it was next door to a few acres of woods and I would cut a few branches from the edges and the apartment manager was totally fine with that. I asked at church if I could cut some wild weeds from behind the parking lot. I paid attention to who had gigantic magnolia trees growing in their yard and asked if they minded if I broke off a few branches. I even kept a pair of shears in my car just in case. I always ask first, but if you're like me, you're going to find that you almost never get no for an answer.

Foraging free branches taught me the power of adding something large with scale into a room, especially when I used big huge branches that were cut bigger than I thought I might need. They showed me where gaps were in my decor and they helped finish off a room.

Branches were a risk free way to learn if I needed a plant somewhere. Branches showed me, and they still show me, that I need different types of vases. I need tall skinny vases with small openings at the top. I need short fat vases with big wide openings. I need vases of different weights to hold different things. So it's been a really good lesson for me in what I didn't have and what I needed.

Even as I'm writing this episode, I happened to look at my phone and I saw a comment that came in just 2 hours ago on a post where I talked about using some dried leafy branches that I picked up on the side of the road.

The comment reads, "I once tried to "forage" (they put that in air quotes, or in actual quotes) for decor after reading her book and even though I inspected the branches and flowers, after every few minutes another insect would crawl out until I just threw them away.

Listen, I don't doubt that happened. And if I were her, I would have done the same thing. The truth is, I bet I HAVE done the same thing. It just didn't stand out in my head and didn't ruin me forever. So, I'm so sorry that happened, if you're listening, and I hope you decide to give foraging another chance. I'm so sorry that your first attempt was so dramatic. But as a lifelong forager, I promise, most of the time there's not really much on the branch. Not much other than what is on your, you know, regular garden flowers that you would pick from outside. My house is not a nest of insects. I don't have termites. I've never brought in a hive of bees hidden in my branches. I hope that you find it's worth the risk for you.

Cutting flowers, branches, vines, all kinds of things from the yard, it does have a cost, it's not money. But I guess the cost is the tiny "risk" (now I'm using quotes) from time to time a tiny passenger might be brought in. And for me, that's a risk worth taking because cutting from the great outdoors is an instant way to finish off every room, welcome the season and make a house feel like home.

Flowers, food, live Christmas trees, potted plants, herbs, even our pets spend time outdoors before we welcome them in.

I understand some people have allergies - and for some even the slightest chance that a stray insect could come in is enough to make it not worth it. I'm assuming these same people also wouldn't dare cut tulips from their front yard either - just too risky. And that's ok if that's you.

But if cutting flowers from the yard is worth the risk for you, I promise that cutting branches, dried grasses, seed pods, weeds, twigs and other items foraged from creation will bring you just as much joy as those flowers and help fill in the empty spaces around your home.

Autumn is the perfect time to start. You can pick up a dead branch from the yard and put it in a tall heavy vase. You could cut the dried Queen Anne's Lace from the edge of the ballfield and put them in an urn. Or you can do what I did just last week, grab a few branches, they were full of dried leaves that were still hanging on. These branches were in a pile next to the road in

someone's yard trash pile. Yes, I had to carry them a half a mile home. Yes, they were heavy. They could have had insects in them, I didn't see any. Yes, people riding by in cars who drove past me looked at me really funny. And yes, the branches look amazing in my house and were worth it.

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This is your personal invitation to join the 100,000 people already on my weekly Cozy Minimal email list.

You can expect pretty encouragement in your inbox weekly, September through May. In this week's email I'm going to share lot's more images of all sorts of yard cuttings in action.