



Growing Lilacs

New Hampshire's official state flower, the purple lilac, grows widely throughout the state, its fragrant flowers perfuming the air each May. The common lilac, *Syringa vulgaris*, arrived with the early settlers. The oldest planting in New Hampshire can be found at the Wentworth-Coolidge Mansion in Portsmouth. It is believed these lilacs were planted in 1750.

Favorite lilac varieties

Prized for their rich flower color and fragrance, hybrid French lilacs are among the most well known species. Slow growing, the French hybrids reach a height of 8-15 feet at maturity. Numerous varieties are available with single or double flowers in shades of white, pink, purple, lavender and magenta.

Lilacs are ideal for tall screen plantings and for hedges and borders because of their robust growth habit and prolific display of flowers. One of the best varieties to use as a screen or hedge is the Chinese lilac, *Syringa chinensis*, sometimes sold as *S. persica*. This shrub grows faster than the common lilac and blooms more freely as a young plant, displaying clusters of fragrant purple-lilac flowers. The Chinese lilac is hardy throughout New Hampshire and grows 8-12 feet tall.

The tallest of the lilacs, *S. pekinensis*, the Chinese tree lilac, and *S. reticulata*, the Japanese tree lilac, can grow to 30 feet and spread to 25 feet. The cherry-like bark of these varieties is especially attractive in the winter months. Both types bear large, off-white single flowers and bloom two weeks after *S. vulgaris*.

There are several compact lilacs available. *Syringa patula* is a Korean lilac with small but dense lavender flowers that have a unique, intensely spicy perfume. This blooms about a week later than *S. vulgaris* and generally grows to 10 feet tall and 10 feet wide. 'Miss Kim' is the best known variety; it has attractive leaves that turn a dark red in the fall and is a very dependable bloomer. *S. palibiniana* (Dwarf Korean lilac) is even smaller, rarely growing larger than 4 feet. This plant makes an attractive hedge with its fragrant, purple-lilac flowers.

The late blooming hybrids (*S. x prestoniae* and *S. x josiflexa*) are fast growing, late flowering plants with lacy, spicy scented flowers and large leaves. These plants need regular pruning and can easily reach 25 feet or more in height and spread. 'Agnes Smith' is a white-flowered variety, 'Nellie Bean' a single purple, and 'Miss Canada' a stunning rose pink. These are just a few of the many varieties available to help extend the lilac blooming season.

Planting lilacs

Select plants grown on their own roots, not grafted, to prevent future problems. Lilacs need room to grow, so allow a distance of 10 - 15 feet between plants. For hedges, allow six feet.

It is best to plant container-grown lilacs in early spring or fall and field-dug plants in the spring at time of bud break. The soil should be well-drained and adjusted to a desired pH range of 6.5 - 7.0 with ground limestone. Only superphosphate fertilizer and limestone are acceptable in the planting hole.

Good loam is important, with little, if any, amendment. Four weeks after planting, surface-apply a slow-release fertilizer, such as 18-6-12, at the rate of two ounces per four sq. ft.

Care of lilacs

Lilacs are hardy and long-lived, requiring only a minimum of care. Once established they seldom need watering, except in periods of drought. A two or three inch layer of organic mulch around lilacs helps control weeds, conserve moisture and stabilize root temperature, preventing heaving during winter and protecting plants from the lawn mower. Pine bark is a good choice because of its availability and attractiveness.

Removing dead flowers soon after they shrivel will improve the appearance of lilacs.

Once lilacs are well established, annual pruning immediately after bloom will improve their vigor and appearance. The goal of pruning is to maintain a clump of seven to 10 stems of different ages. How many to remove will depend on the variety and plant vigor. Common lilacs grow much more slowly and produce many more shoots than the hybrid varieties. In addition, thin out vigorous top growth to increase flower bud formation by allowing sunlight to reach the center of the plant.

As long as they are growing vigorously, lilacs require no fertilization. To promote more vigorous shoot growth, fertilize in early spring or in mid-to-late October using ½ lb. of 5-10-10 fertilizer per 25 sq. ft. Test soil every three or four years to determine lime requirements.

Diseases and Pests

Powdery mildew is the most common disease of lilacs. It appears as a dusty-white color on the leaves in late summer. The disease is unsightly but rarely causes serious harm. Spray with potassium bicarbonate, available at most garden centers, to prevent mildew.

Oystershell scale looks like small oyster shells stuck on the branches, twigs and trunk. Underneath the "shell" is a small sucking insect. Prune out heavily affected branches or spray plants with horticultural oil during the summer months.

Lilac borers burrow into the wood of the plant and can cause the death of some stems. Look for entry holes and prune out affected stems. Removing the oldest stems while pruning helps minimize borer damage, as these insects seem to prefer the most mature wood.

Leaf miners feed on the tissue inside the leaves, leaving blotch-like markings.

Reluctant Bloomers

Some lilacs never flower. One or more of these conditions may be the problem:

Inadequate light Transplant to a sunny location or limb up overhanging tree branches to allow more light.

Too young Many lilacs do not flower for five to seven years!

Overly rich soil or too much nitrogen fertilizer Soil rich in nitrogen will promote leafy growth at the expense of flowers. Light root pruning may help.

Ill-timed pruning Summer, fall or winter pruning sacrifices flowers for next year. Prune lilacs immediately after flowering in the spring.

For more information about lilac problems, call the UNH Cooperative Extension Family, Home & Garden Education Center Info Line, 1-877-398-4769, weekdays 9 A.M. - 2 A.M.

*original fact sheet written by Master Gardener Deborah Jones and David Seavey, Extension Educator,
edited and revised 5/00*

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