



LILACS

Lilacs have been in cultivation at least five hundred years. Twenty-eight species have been crossbred and hybridized to produce hundreds of different varieties. Lilacs are deciduous shrubs, three to twenty feet tall, with showy, fragrant panicles of spring blooms. The flowers may be white, pink, lavender, purple and yellow with single or double florets.

Lilacs belong to the genus, *Syringa*, belonging to the olive family. The name “Syringa” is derived from a word meaning “pipe”. An old common name for lilac was pipe-tree. *Syringa* has also been used when referring to mock orange shrubs (actually in the genus *Philadelphus*) because shepherd’s pipes used to be made from the pithy stems.

HARDINESS:

Plant lilacs with confidence--they are reliable plants. Look how they survive in homesteads that have been abandoned for generations. Treatment can be rough and still lilacs respond. They are definitely recommended for the beginning gardener. Very few other plants have the reputation of surviving 50° below zero temperatures. In fact, most lilacs must have a dormant season to bloom well.

PLANTING:

Lilacs can be planted spring, summer or early fall. The ideal time is in the early spring while lilacs are still dormant.

Lilacs need to be planted where there is lots of sun (six hours minimum, but more is better) and good drainage. If the site is clay or compacted, amend the entire lilac bed, not just the planting hole. Use bagged steer manure, aged manure, compost or other organic materials.

The planting hole should be wide enough to spread roots without crowding and deep enough to allow the lilac to be set no more than 1-2 inches deeper than original setting. If a plant is set deeper the plant will be slow to establish or may even die from rot at the base. Leave at least one foot of cleared space around newly planted lilacs.

Soil moisture the first year is critical. Drought stress, even for a short time, will restrict growth and may even retard plant establishment. Do not fertilize the first year. Don’t add plant starter mixes to planting hole.

FERTILIZER:

Lilacs respond vigorously to regular, liberal amounts of fertilizer. Fertilize established (second year and after) lilacs in early spring, March or early April, with 5-10-5, 5-10-10, 10-10-10 or 20-20-20. Apply before growth has begun. Broadcast directly on soil over root zone. Slow release or organic fertilizers can be applied a little later in the season when soil has warmed. Avoid high nitrogen fertilizers, since you will get foliage at the expense of flowers, and you may encourage some diseases.

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e-mail your garden questions to: mastergardener@spokanecounty.org

PRUNING:

The buds containing the flower clusters are formed in the fall toward the tips of branches. Therefore, any extensive cutting during the dormant season will reduce the floral display the following spring. Dormant pruning is usually restricted to removal of dead wood, suckers, weak spindly wood, and disease-infected branches.

For flower show competition, you may want to deliberately reduce the number of flower buds, thus throwing more strength into remaining flowers. Light pruning to promote symmetry can be done as soon as the flowers begin to fade. Spent flowers can be cut off for good looks, but it is not absolutely necessary. Suckers may be cut off anytime, preferably under the soil line.

SEVERE PRUNING:

For older plants that need complete renovation prune to within one foot of the ground. It must be recognized that severe pruning results in the loss of blooms for one to three years. For these reasons, a wise pruning program aims to avoid severe and drastic cuts by giving the bushes annual attention.

SELECTING VARIETIES:

In limited space *S. meyeri* ‘Palibin’ grows slowly and rarely over 4 feet. Blooms around June 1. Pale lilac to lilac purple.

Earliest blooming - *Syringa x hyacinthiflora*, which include Annabel-pink; Mt. Baker-white; Esther Staley-bicolor.

Midseason - *Syringa vulgaris* varieties: Charles Joly-magenta; Katherine Havemeyer-mixed pink and lilac; Ludwig Spaeth-single purple; Ellen Willmott-double white; President Grevy-double blue; Vestale-single white; Sensation-single purple with white edging; President Lincoln-single blue.

Late blooming - *Syringa prestoniae* varieties: Donald Wyman-purple; James MacFarlane-rosy pink; Miss Canada-red pink. These bloom around June 1 and need more space than other types of lilacs.

Very late blooming (early July) - Japanese Tree Lilacs

PESTS and DISEASES

Information can be found at: <http://hortsense.cahnrs.wsu.edu/Home/HortsenseHome.aspx>