



Quietly stable form, lovely in bloom, delicious flamboyant fragrance - the genus *Syringa* has it all, and yet, it is underutilized in the home landscape. *Syringa*, commonly called the lilac (named for the color) should be an easy choice for every northern garden. While enjoying a recent, but small, resurgence in popularity – they are still often overlooked. Not something that is really understandable. Maybe it's because lilacs don't have a real sexy or romantic history. Perhaps the scent is too strong for the faint of heart. More than likely, it is because they seem to be everywhere and when seen so often, invisibility occurs. Please, a bit of appreciation is in order for these hardworking, and underappreciated, shrubs.

The *Syringa* genus generally contains between 20 and 35 species – seems a bit vague, but this number varies with periodic taxonomic changes. A member of the Oleaceae (yes, olive) family, *Syringa* is derived from a Greek word that means pipe/hollow stems as these were supposedly used by early physicians to inject medicines and to let blood. Some plant materials have colorful cultural histories that follow them down through the centuries. But lilacs – no fanfare, no wars fought over them. Through time, they just quietly graced the landscapes of their origin, maintaining a sense of comfort and familiarity. Historically, there are a few references to early breeding programs going back about 500 years. But the majority of the breeding efforts have occurred within the last 100 or so years. So, where did lilacs come from? Originally found only in the Balkans, western China, Korea, Japan, and the eastern mountains of India - these cold climate, mountainous plants eventually found their way to Europe. That trip was made in the packs and crates of plant hunters and explorers, and although their efforts were not always laudable (sorry to say), it ensured that affection for this plant could be shared throughout the world. Can you imagine the “wow” factor of the first sight of a hillside in the wild covered with unknown shrubs in full flower? I'd be tempted to take some home, too.

From these rather quiet beginnings has emerged a nice line-up of species (and subsequent) cultivars to choose from. Breeding backgrounds may be categorized as hybrids - two parental species, multibrids – meaning many parental species crosses. To be very specific in defining the number of parent species, the terminology can reflect the number of parental units – 3 would be a tribrid, 8 would be called an octobrid – you get the idea.

Let's look at some of the species. Two that are native to the Balkans are *S. vulgaris* and *S. josikaea*. *S. vulgaris* is what most gardeners know as the common lilac. It is often an irregularly shaped shrub that can be multi-stemmed or trained into a modified standard. With minimum interference, they will grow to about 20' in height and 15' in width. Pruning is best done immediately after flowering as the blooms on this species set in the fall, on existing wood. Even though most flower panicles will not get any longer than about 8", the scent is big - about the best out of all of the *Syringa* species. Coloring on those flowers can range from white to deep purple. Those lilacs that are termed “French” are not actually from France but are really from *S. vulgaris*. (Because of the successful breeding accomplishments by Victor Lemoine and his son from France, the resulting plants were commonly called “French lilacs”.) *Syringa josikaea*, or the Hungarian lilac, is actually a bit more tolerant of warmer climates, cold hardy in zones 5-7. This shrub is multi-stemmed with nicely arched branches. Good form on a moderately sized plant – only reaching about 10' tall and 12' wide. The lightly scented flowers have a loose form and generally a deep lilac coloring. All around, it is a nice lilac for the garden.

From the Asian species, there a number that are readily available and then some that are not very easy to find in mainstream offerings. *Syringa meyeri* (Meyer lilac) is not a native species, but has been documented for hundreds of years. This one is thought to be one of the earliest lilac breeding results. The flowers set early, often before the leaves unfurl, which sets it up for late spring frost damage. As one of the earliest bloomers, it is a good choice for early color in northern gardens. The overall shape is a consistently round outline, maturing to about 8' tall and 12' wide. *Syringa microphylla* (litleleaf lilac) is a lovely small leaved shrub that spreads about 1 ½ times the height, maturing to about 12'. Not a tremendous early display but given the right conditions, it will re-flower in early fall. *Syringa patula* (Manchurian lilac) – ‘Miss Kim’ is the most commonly known cultivar of this species. It has become somewhat of a staple for landscapers as it has a shorter stature that works well in smaller spaces. The lilac colored flowers are nicely scented, not overpowering, with the panicles frequently occur in pairs. This compact shrub can easily be kept to about 3' in height, with vigorous pruning, but if left to its own devices will reach about 10' tall. *Syringa pekinensis* (Pekin lilac) is similar to *S. reticulata* (see below) only smaller in stature and leans

toward a multi-stem structure. The creamy white flower panicles are not large, reaching only about 6" in length. A real selling point for this one is the beautiful bark – a nice reddish tint that exfoliates in sheets. Within this species can be found one of the few weeping forms of lilac called 'Pendula'. *Syringa reflexa* (nodding lilac) is another species with a bit more heat tolerance, again suitable for zones 5-7. This one is often used as parent for late blooming cultivar development. Although there is really not much for discernable fragrance – that can be an added bonus for those gardeners that like the look but not the scent of lilac flowers. A common trait for this species is that many flowers will open as one color and fade to another as they age. *Syringa reticulata* (Japanese tree lilac) is one of the best choices when looking for a specimen plant. A slow grower, it will only advance about 1 ½' per year to a mature height of about 30' tall and 25' wide, developing a good arching structure over its life span. The moderately scented, creamy white flower panicles are quite large reaching almost 12" long and 10" wide. With that much flower, a good show is almost guaranteed. As an added bonus, these tree lilacs are known for being very disease and insect resistant.

*Syringa villosa* (late lilac) originated in western China. This lilac is rather underutilized but, fortunately, becoming more available as more hybridization is being done to improve the current cultivars. Although not as fragrant as *S. vulgaris*, it does have a nice fragrance. The late occurring pink to white flowers hold until June, develop on new wood and are truly terminal, all making for a nice garden showing.

All *Syringa* cultivars are divided into seven classes based flower color – very subjective, but it is what it is. Class I – white; Class II – violet; Class III – Blue; Class IV – lilac; Class V – pink (least common to find); Class VI – magenta; Class VII – purple. All classes have cultivars of beautiful single and double flower forms. When in bloom, most lilacs will last three to four weeks, depending on temperatures and sun exposure. Cooler temperatures will allow the flower show to continue a bit longer once it begins. Heavy or prolonged rains may reduce the number of buds that flower fully and the length of bloom time. For those lilacs of a deeper color, a bit of afternoon shade will prolong flower life. Throughout all of the species, the scent will range from deliciously heady to rather unpleasant. Keep that in mind when choosing. If edible plants are your thing – take heart. Lilac flowers can be eaten. Taste test different cultivars as some are better than others. No matter what class a lilac is in, most will respond to similar conditions for good growth. When choosing a planting site, look for an area

with well-drained soil. (Although there are a few that will tolerate a bit of consistent moisture – no wet feet allowed.) A soil pH somewhere between 6 and 7 will do, but they are somewhat adaptable if all other conditions are optimal - very acidic soil may require a bit of amendment to raise the pH. While fine if left to their own devices, lilacs will give a better flower return with minor fertility additions. As always, have a soil test done as a starting point in care. In general, a well balanced fertilizer added in the spring will do. If well-composted materials are available, work a bit into the upper areas of the root zone every year. Full sun exposure, six to eight hours per day, is necessary for good flower development. And although lilacs can be susceptible to powdery mildew, bacterial blight, lilac borers, and a few other problems – most issues are relatively easy to manage. For powdery mildew control, it can be as easy as choosing a location with good air flow and judiciously timed pruning.

Pruning lilacs is always a good idea. Depending on the expected end result, pruning techniques will vary. If developing single shrub shaping, early pruning will help the overall structure. If shaping a multi-stemmed species, encourage new growth through renewal pruning – removal of the older wood each spring after flowering, and then carefully pruning smaller branches to maintain the shape. Working the shrub in this manner every two to three years will ensure good shape development in the newer wood, reducing the amount of leggy branches, and increasing the size of flowers. Lilacs can be used effectively as hedge plantings. Be careful to choose powdery mildew resistant cultivars for hedge use. As hedges are to be pruned tightly, choosing correctly will eliminate the unsightliness and potential dieback problems that powdery mildew may cause a few years down the road. For the initial phases of hedging, cut back the shrubs at planting time to encourage a smaller and denser branching structure. Remove older growth every year and shape the younger branches into an inverted 'V' form. This formation will develop a greater width at the base, allowing for more sun exposure - creating a better growth situation throughout the plant.

Lilacs are such reliable garden plants – choose a new one for your home landscape. How can you go wrong?