



Lilacs Make for a Lovely Spring

By Dawn Pettinelli, UCONN Home & Garden Education Center

One of the most delightful flowers of May is the delicately perfumed, fragile, lavender blooms of the old-fashioned lilac, *Syringa vulgaris*. Lilacs are versatile flowering shrubs with a wide range of uses in the landscape. Try them as specimen shrubs, as a hedge, in a mixed shrub border or as the backdrop for the flower garden.

The name lilac is thought to come from the Arabic 'laylak' or the Persian 'nylac' which means blue. The botanical name, *Syringa*, comes from the Greek word for pipe, syrinx. Lilac stems were hollowed out and made into pipes by the Turks. From Asia, the lilac was brought to Europe and later to America. Early settlers planted lilacs by their doorways, a reminder of their roots, in their new land.

While lilac flowers are quite delicate, the plants are among the most hardy with some species being able to withstand temperatures of minus 60 degrees F. Lilacs are relatively carefree, blooming for many years even if neglected. They range from 4 to 30 feet high. Lavender colored blossoms are most common but lilacs can be found in white, blue, pink, magenta, purple and even yellow.

There are numerous species and varieties of lilacs as well as extensive hybridization. The old fashioned lilac is most commonly grown in this country. Blossoms are very fragrant and many beautifully colored cultivars are available. This lilac can reach a height of 20 feet if not pruned and has smooth heart-shaped leaves.

Those looking for an earlier show might try the largeleaf lilac also called the early lilac, *S. oblata*. The flowers are also quite fragrant, the new foliage is tinged with red and, come fall, the large leaves turn a handsome crimson. Early lilacs reach about 12 feet at maturity. This species has been crossed with the old-fashioned lilac and many hybrids are available including 'Maiden's Blush', a dwarf, early pink and 'Pocahontas', sporting deep violet flowers.

A spectacular specimen plant, the Japanese tree lilac, *S. reticulata*, blooms in early summer producing huge clusters of creamy white flowers. It grows to 25 or 30 feet tall and is less bothered by lilac borers. The Japanese tree lilac also produces interesting seedpods.

Lilacs require a sunny site with good drainage. They prefer the soil pH to be between 6.0 to 7.0 so limestone additions to the soil are often necessary. Plants are generally fertilized once each spring. Mulching will help retain soil moisture and, while drought tolerant, lilacs will perform better if given adequate water during dry periods.

Pruning is not usually necessary for the first 3 to 4 years following planting. After that, remove dead branches and weaker wood from the center of the plant. Overgrown plants can be rejuvenated by removing one-third of the older stems each year for 3 consecutive years allowing new stems to take their place. Prune as soon as flowering finishes.

Lilacs have 3 major pests. Powdery mildew is a fungus which turns the leaves a powdery white in late summer. Although it makes the leaves look awful, powdery mildew generally does not hurt the plants and usually no control measures are recommended. Concerned lilac owners could use least toxic controls such as potassium bicarbonate, sulfur or copper, or commercial biofungicides applied as new growth appears. Always read follow the instructions on the package.

Oystershell scales appear as ashy gray bumps on the stems. These pests are usually controlled with horticultural oil sprays.

Lilac borers burrow into the wood especially on older stems. A flexible wire can be inserted into each hole crushing the larvae. The borers often enter the stem just a foot or two above the ground. Look for telltale piles of sawdust around the plant.

For the most part lilacs are relatively trouble free and their beautiful fragrant flowers are surely worth a little effort on your part. If you have questions about lilacs or on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.

