

HOME GROUNDS FACT SHEET



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Lilacs (*Syringa*)



Lilacs are a harbinger of spring and a beautiful fragrant flower dating back to ancient times. Native to Russia and Poland, these deciduous shrubs were introduced to the United States

during the mid 17th century by French settlers. *Syringa vulgaris* or common lilac (sometimes called French lilac) is the most popular species and includes hundreds of varieties that differ in color, size, flower type and fragrance. Its floral show comes in late spring from masses of small flowers packed into dense pyramidal or conical clusters. Unfortunately, flower blooms only last for about a two-week period, but their fragrance and beauty make the effort worthwhile. The blooming period can be extended by choosing several species or varieties of lilacs that flower at different times.

Site Preparation and Timing

Lilacs require well drained, loamy soil, high in organic matter, with a neutral (7.0) to slightly alkaline pH. If the soil is strongly acidic, add lime into the soil before planting. Contact Cornell Cooperative Extension for information on soil testing (Fact Sheet A-1-0 "Soil Testing"). Lilacs do not like "wet feet," so don't choose a site where water remains or "pools" after heavy rainfall. Lilacs like full sun and require a minimum of 6 hours of sun per day to bloom properly. Air circulation is also critical to help prevent powdery mildew. Space plants eight feet apart when planting as a hedge or in a row. When planting lilacs, keep in mind that they do not like to compete with other perennials for space and nutrients in the soil. This is particularly important during the first three years after planting while your lilacs are getting established.

Early spring, before bud break, is the best time of the year to plant lilacs. Don't be concerned about blooms the first year—it may take two or more years for new shrubs to establish and produce flowers of full size and true color.

Soil Preparation

Dig a planting hole that is 2 to 3 times the width (sloped sides are best) of the root ball or container. Depth of the hole should be the same as the ball or container. Remember that you only get one chance to get your lilac shrub off to a good start, so take the time to dig a hole worthy of your new plant. If planting a bare root plant, soak the roots in water for at least two hours prior to planting. Heavy subsoils or excessively well drained sandy soils need to be improved before they are suitable for growing plants. Usually these soils lack sufficient organic matter and can be improved by incorporating compost. When planting an individual tree or shrub in good soil, the rule for backfilling should be "what comes out goes back in." This allows the upper layer of soil to mix with the subsoil and, at the same time, the cultivation/digging process loosens the soil structure.

Planting

Set your plant in the hole at the **same level** it was growing in the container, burlap or bare rooted. If the plant is "B & B" (Balled and Burlapped), remove the top half or tuck burlap down into hole. If synthetic burlap is used, try to remove it completely. Remove any string/twine that was used to hold the burlap in place. Fill in the whole with the backfill and tamp soil gently. If the roots on a container lilac have formed a circular pattern, tease the root system prior to planting.

Water your newly planted shrub **thoroughly**. Add 2 to 3 inches of mulch around the plant, being careful not to have the mulch touching the base stems/branches of the shrub. As a general rule 1-1½" of water (including natural rainfall) per week should be adequate during the first growing season.

Fertilization

Do not fertilize newly planted lilac plants. Beginning the second growing season, fertilize in early spring before growth starts with a balanced fertilizer which is not too high in nitrogen (e.g. 5-10-5 or similar). Too much nitrogen may result in green shrubs with few blooms, so make sure to keep clear of your lilac shrubs when fertilizing your lawn.

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Maintenance and Pruning

Pruning is necessary for healthy and vigorous lilacs. In late winter/early spring (mid-February/mid-April), remove any crossing or dead branches. As branches grow taller and thicker, they will tend to produce fewer blooms. In order to avoid this, each year remove ¼ of the largest branches/stems allowing no more than 6 to 12 major branches to remain. As basal suckers appear in late spring, remove all but two by cutting off below the ground level. The remaining suckers will develop into new vigorous stems/branches on your lilac.

Deadheading should take place within a week to 10 days after flowers have faded so that energy will go into new bud and leaf development, rather than forming seed heads. Height control of your lilac can be accomplished by pruning up to a foot of growth, depending on the desired size, immediately after flower blossoms have faded.

If your existing lilac is totally overgrown and straggly, there is still hope – rejuvenation pruning. You can prune overgrown lilacs (if relatively healthy) down to the base of the plant in late winter/early spring. This action will force new vigorous growth and put you back on the road to having a beautiful, properly proportioned shrub. Blooms may be sacrificed for two to three years while the shrub is reestablishing itself. Once rejuvenated, maintenance pruning should be performed on an annual basis.

Diseases and Problems

Major insect pests include stem borer, scale and leaf miner. Borers signal their presence by leaving eighth-inch-sized holes in the stems and larger branches, often one to two feet above ground level. Scale looks like small, elongated, brown or gray warts on the stems, and can be controlled by pruning out the most heavily infested branches.

Lilacs can fall victim to leaf diseases in late summer and early fall. The most common include powdery mildew fungus and leaf roll necrosis. Powdery mildew produces unsightly whitish gray patches on the leaves. The problem tends to be mostly aesthetic and usually does not result in permanent injury to the plant. With leaf roll necrosis, the leaf margins die and roll upward and downward, disfiguring the plant. Apparently caused by air pollution, the symptoms appear in late summer/early fall, around the same time as powdery mildew.

For additional information see Fact Sheets A-2-15, E-1-4 and E-1-31

Why Lilacs Don't Bloom

Lilacs need full sun and well drained soil to produce peak blooms. Fertilizing in early spring with a 5-10-5 (or similar) fertilizer is appropriate for lilacs. Use of high nitrogen component fertilizers may encourage too much green growth and few blooms. When fertilizing your lawn, stay clear of your lilac plants. One final blooming tip – pruning stimulates new growth and keeps your shrub healthy, vigorous and in proper proportion. Annual maintenance pruning and deadheading will help insure reliable flowering on your lilacs.

Tree Lilacs and Other Specialty Lilacs

■ *Syringa reticulata* (Japanese Tree Lilac) grows 20 to 30 feet in height and 15 to 25 feet in spread, and is adaptable from Zones 3 to 7. Branches are spreading in nature, developing a somewhat oval to rounded crown. Over time, the branches and leaves become somewhat arching and the tree becomes more graceful. Flowers bloom early to mid June, are typically creamy white and fragrant, forming on 12" long and 6" to 10" wide panicles. While the flower panicles on tree lilacs are beautiful to look at, they have a rather strong fragrance similar to privet. Unlike common lilacs (*Syringa vulgaris*), basal suckers should be removed and the tree trained into one to three main trunks, depending on the gardener's preference.

■ *Syringa pekinensis* (Peking Lilac) is a spreading shrub or multi-stem tree that grows to 18 feet high and wide, with arching branches with creamy white, fragrant flowers and dark green leaves. Typically blooms in mid June.

■ *Syringa x chinensis* (Chinese Lilac) is a hybrid growing up to 15 feet high. This lilac is more graceful than the common lilac with finer textured foliage and twigs. Blooms come in rose/purple and white colors in mid May.

■ *Syringa patula* 'Miss Kim' is a compact shrub with lavender flowers and dark green leaves that turn reddish in the fall. This is a good choice for small gardens. Rarely needs much pruning. Blooms in late April/early May.

■ *Syringa meyeri* (?) 'Palabin' is a compact form of the species with smaller leaves and overall size. Reddish-purple buds open to pink flowers. Somewhat resistant to powdery mildew.

■ *Syringa microphylla* 'Superba' is a broad spreading, dense shrub with much smaller leaves than the common lilac. Flowers are rosy lilac and fragrant, usually appearing in late May into early June.

Integrated Pest Management (IPM)

Considerations

IPM is a common sense approach to pest control and plant care. It employs a number of measures to prevent, control or reduce plant problems. These include using resistant plant varieties, proper plant selection and placement, good aftercare and biological and/or mechanical controls. As a last resort, after all other remedies have been explored, a pesticide* that is least toxic to people and natural predators, can be considered. Prior to using any pesticides, plants should always be monitored for the degree of infestation and a sensible control measure considered.

* A pesticide is a substance that kills, or attempts to kill, a particular pest, e.g. *insecticide*, *fungicide*, *herbicide*, etc.