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The Lilac, New Hampshire's State Flower

BY PHYLLIS ALEXANDER

Littleton Garden Club

Soon, our winter memories will wane as we enjoy the warmth of spring weather and the May sun. Soon, our state flower, the beloved lilac, will begin to bloom. While many plants are fragrant, none seem to carry the beautiful, heady fragrance of the lilac. You might remember lilacs in your grandmother's garden; lilacs are connected to our memories by our sense of smell and our association with their sweet fragrance.

New Hampshire is known for sugar maple and lilac. I was surprised to learn that even though the purple lilac is our state flower, it is not native to North America. It came from Persia to Austria and traveled westward.

European colonists brought lilacs to North America and planted them at their front doors to welcome visitors. Governor Benning Wentworth planted lilacs in Portsmouth as early as 1750. Lilacs survive temperatures of -40, yet still blossom in the spring. Although they don't hold the longevity prize, lilacs can survive 100 years or longer.

While this hardy plant provides us with beauty and fragrance, growing lilacs can also help support wildlife. Bees, butterflies, and hummingbirds are attracted to the blossom nectar, and birds find shelter and protection in the dense foliage. Lilacs are also deer-resistant.

The most familiar lilac is the common lilac or *Syringa vulgaris*. Lilacs flower in a single or double form and come in shades of blue, violet, pink, magenta, purple, and white. Several favorites include "Ellen Willmot," with fragrant panicles of pure white flowers. The single blue "President Lincoln" and the single purple "Ludwig Spaeth" are also famous. All three varieties are highly fragrant and make good specimen plants.

A later blooming lilac, the Japanese Tree Lilac (*Syringa reticulata*) has large clusters of creamy, white flowers. Japanese lilacs can be trained into a tree form or left to grow as a large shrub. They provide good winter interest with shiny, reddish-brown bark. Unfortunately, this variety does not have the characteristic lilac fragrance.

Another easy-to-grow favorite is the "Bloomerang." It blooms in the spring, rests, and blooms again from mid-summer until fall. It is a vigorous grower that attracts pollinators. Cut off spent flowers, or it won't re-bloom later in the season. It isn't necessary to deadhead other varieties.

When pruning lilacs five years and older, remove one-third of the old branches. Pruning promotes air circulation, discourages mildew, and stimulates flower production. Remove suckers at the base of the plant. Prune lilacs right after blooming because most lilacs bloom on old wood.

As a child, I remember my mother referring to the prized deep purple, fragrant lilacs as "French Lilacs." Most lilacs are known as French Lilacs. Cultivation began in France in 1570. Victor Lemoine (1823-1911) undertook a breeding program with *Syringa vulgaris*, and his company developed new hybrids unsurpassed in beauty and scent. The popularity of lilacs grew with the cultivation of these French hybrids, and Lemoine hybrids still dominate today.

When I moved into my New Hampshire home over twenty years ago, several large old lilacs from the 1940s existed on the property. I became smitten with a smaller, newer lilac variety called "Miss Kim" (*Syringa patula*). I planted it as a landscape shrub in a sunny corner. My "Miss Kim" blooms later in the season and offers dainty pink panicles of single blossoms.

Lilacs need six to eight hours of sunlight. Plant in spring and not under trees. If the soil has a heavy clay consistency, mix in some compost. Keep one foot of cleared space. Water the plant well for the first two years. It might take two years or more for your lilac to bloom.

During the winter, supplement the soil with wood ash. In early spring, add bone meal, compost, or a 5-10-5 mix of organic fertilizer. Some varieties are susceptible to powdery mildew. Lilacs are tough plants that thrive well in zones 3 to 8.

Lilacs make beautiful floral arrangements. It's essential to condition the stems before arranging

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