

A versatile ground cover

Question: Can you give me some tips for growing lilacs, and recommend varieties that will do well in our area?

Answer: An enduringly popular landscape favorite, the lilac (*Syringa vulgaris*) is typically grown for its intense fragrance and beautiful blooms.

Lilacs are versatile in that they can serve as corner plantings, wind-screens or flowering hedges. They can add a good source of shade or privacy when planted as a hedgerow. Lilacs are a perfect background shrub for any large garden.

Lilacs range from dwarf varieties up to 4 feet tall or larger types that can reach heights up to 30 feet. There are early, mid- and late-season lilacs, which – when grown together – ensure a steady bloom for at least six weeks. The fragrant flowers are good for cutting and attractive to butterflies and other pollinators.

All lilacs belong to the genus *Syringa*. Among the best known are the following:

■ **Common lilac** (*Syringa vulgaris*) is the most common. These shrubs can grow to a height of 20 feet. The flowers are fragrant and usually lilac-colored, although they can come in other colors.

■ **Persian lilac** (*Syringa persica*) can grow to a height of 10 feet. The fragrant flowers are pale in color and are about half

the size of those of the common lilac. This type makes a great hedge.

■ **Chinese lilac** (*Syringa chinensis*) is a cross between the Persian and the common lilac. The fragrant, lilac purple flowers are in greater profusion with smaller leaves than the common type.

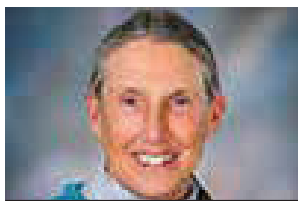
■ **Little leaf lilac** (*Syringa microphylla*) is a round, low, bush-like plant that seldom grows over 4 feet. It produces small, late-blooming, fragrant flowers.

■ **Dwarf Korean lilac** (*Syringa palebinina*) is an even shorter bush than the little leaf lilac. Its flowers are quite fragrant and bloom late in the spring.

■ **Tree lilacs** (*Syringa amurensis*) resemble small trees and can reach a height of 30 feet.

In early summer, tree lilacs produce spectacular clusters of off-white, privet-like blooms. A common variety is the Japanese tree lilac (*Syringa amurensis japonica*), which produces huge clusters up to 1 foot long of yellow-white flowers late in the season. It can make a terrific small shade or street tree. With proper lilac tree care, these lovely plants can last decades in your landscape.

The ideal soil for growing lilacs is a fertile, humus-rich loam,



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well-drained and neutral to alkaline soil (at a pH near 7.0). If your soil is in poor condition, add compost to enrich. Se-

lect a site where your lilac will get full sun – at least six hours. If lilacs don't get enough sun, they will not bloom well.

Transplanting lilacs from a nursery is also easy. If it is container-grown, spread out the roots as you settle the plant into the ground; if it is balled or bur-lapped, gently remove the covering and any rope before planting. Set the plant 2 or 3 inches deeper than it grew in the nursery, and work topsoil in around the roots. Water in. Then fill in the hole with more topsoil.

You can plant your lilac in either spring or fall, although late winter or early spring is preferred for our area. Space multiple lilac bushes 5 to 15 feet apart, depending on the variety. Each spring, apply a layer of compost under the plant, followed by mulch to retain moisture and control weeds. Water your newly planted shrub during the summer, especially during our droughty periods.

Lilacs won't bloom if they're over fertilized.

They can handle a handful of 10-10-10 in late winter, but no more. After your



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Lilacs are hardy and easy to grow. With proper planting and care, anyone can enjoy the beauty and fragrance of these low-maintenance shrubs.

lilac has finished blooming, spread some lime and well-rotted manure around the base. Trim the shrub to shape it and remove suckers at the same time.

Lilacs bloom on old wood, so it's critical to prune in the spring right after they bloom. If you prune later in the summer, winter or fall, you may be removing the flowering wood. Every year after bloom, remove any dead wood. Prune out the oldest canes (down to the ground). Remove the small suckers. Cut back weak branches to a strong shoot. Cut back tall canes to eye height.

If your lilac is old and in really bad shape, remove one-third of the

oldest canes (down to the ground) in year one, half of the remaining old wood in year two, and the rest of the old wood in year three. Another option for old lilacs is to chop the whole thing back to about 6 or 8 inches high. It sounds drastic, but lilacs are very hardy.

The downside to this option is that it takes a few years to grow back. The upside is less work and more reward, as the lilac will grow back bursting with blooms. It must be recognized that severe pruning results in the loss of blooms for one to three years.

Since lilacs are considered low-maintenance shrubs, the general care

of lilacs is minimal, with the exception of regular annual pruning. Powdery mildew may appear after a summer of hot, humid weather. It may be unsightly, but it does no harm. Ignore it.

So, all in all, who doesn't love lilacs? Lilacs are hardy and easy to grow. With proper planting and care, anyone can enjoy the beauty and the sweet, haunting fragrance of these low-maintenance shrubs for decades.

Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners via email at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu, by phone at 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg.