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MERVIN C. EISEL

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Lilacs for Minnesota

One of the beauties of a Minnesota spring is its lilacs. Their floral display and fragrance make them delightful additions to the garden. Lilacs grow better here with our severe winters than in areas with milder climates. Most lilacs are fully hardy throughout the state. Once lilacs are established, they will bloom each year for many years with little care.

Lilacs can be used in windbreaks, hedges, and shrub borders and as lawn specimens. Some of the dwarf types can be used in foundation plantings. The Japanese tree lilac makes an attractive lawn tree.

SITE

To bloom normally, all lilacs require full sunlight. Shade will reduce the quantity and quality of the flowers. In dense shade the plants become leggy and will not bloom.

Lilacs are not particular about the soil in which they grow, but do best in a fertile soil. Good soil drainage is essential. If the soil pH is below 6.0, adding lime may be beneficial.

PLANTING

Common lilacs are large shrubs and will eventually grow about 10-12 feet tall. In the shrub border, such lilacs should be planted about 8 feet from each other.

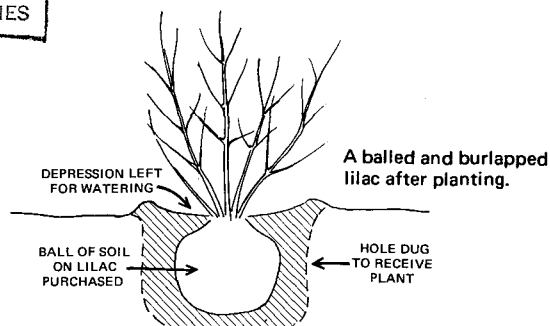
Lilacs should be planted as container grown plants or field grown plants that have been dug up with the ball of soil attached to their roots (commonly referred to as balled and burlaped or B & B plants). Bare root plants often take 2-5 years to recover from transplanting and bloom, while B & B plants often bloom the first spring. Bare root plants should be planted only in early spring. Spring and fall planting have been equally successful with B & B or container grown plants.

Lilacs can be increased from cuttings or by grafting. Lilacs grown from cuttings commonly are called own root lilacs. Plant them in preference to lilacs that have been grafted. Own root lilacs may be slightly more expensive, but they are well worth the extra cost.

Dig a generous hole when planting lilacs, just as you would when planting other nursery stock. Set the ball of soil containing the roots slightly deeper than the top of the soil ball. Plants will benefit from a thorough watering after planting. Forming a slightly raised ring of soil around the plants to create a slight depression around them will facilitate later waterings.

PESTS

Lilacs have few pest problems, although the lilac borer occasionally is one. The larva of this borer destroys the sapwood of the stem and wilting often results. Sawdust-like material hanging from openings along the stem indicates the presence of the borer. The borer winters in the stem, so infested stems should be removed and burned before fall.



Scale insects can be a problem on lilacs, especially the Chinese lilac. Plants can be sprayed with lime-sulfur when dormant. If you don't apply a dormant spray, apply a spray with malathion at 2-week intervals beginning in mid-May. Repeat the application twice at 2-week intervals.

Powdery mildew is a fungus disease that causes white spotting on lilac leaves. Lilacs showing signs of this disease should be sprayed with wettable sulfur or Karathane.

PRUNING

Most lilacs should not be used for clipped or formal hedges. Many of them are too coarse, and pruning removes the flower buds, which prevents flowering. The Chinese lilac, due to its finer texture and denser growth habit, is one of the better lilacs for hedges.

Old lilacs often outgrow their allotted space. By removing about one-third of the old stems each year over a 3-year period and leaving young suckers to take the place of those removed, old overgrown lilacs can be renewed. Cutting all stems to the ground at one time is not recommended, since it will produce tall, spindly plants.

Old lilac shrubs can be pruned to a small clump-type tree that will be interesting and attractive as a specimen plant in the landscape. You can develop the tree-like shape by removing young stems and pruning weak lower branches. These plants will bloom at the top, but the fragrance and color of the blossoms will give the effect of a small flowering tree.

Some lilacs produce an abundance of suckers around the base. Prune these off at the ground line, except for a few to replace some of the older large stems.

Old flower clusters should be removed promptly wherever they are accessible. Remove the bloom and its short stem with a sharp pruning shears. Leave no stub above the pair of side branches beneath the faded cluster.

This late blooming lilac, Miss Kim, is very compact.



A white French hybrid lilac that shows very few suckers.





FERTILIZING AND WATERING

A year after planting, lilacs will benefit from an application of fertilizer or a 2-4 inch mulch of well rotted manure. Make the application in the spring before growth starts to about the time bloom starts. Use a complete fertilizer such as 10-10-10. Use 1/4 pound for small plants, increasing the amount according to plant size. Large lilacs should receive a pound of fertilizer. Apply the fertilizer around the plant as far as the branch spread, avoiding direct contact with the stems.

If you plant lilacs on dry sites, they will benefit from thorough waterings during dry periods.

SELECTING LILACS

There are many species of lilacs that are native to different parts of the world. By planting different species and hybrids, you can prolong the lilac bloom period. Some of the early and late blooming lilacs are not as leggy as the common lilacs.

The French are largely responsible for hybridizing and improving the common lilac. For this reason the improved common lilacs often are called French hybrids. Many of their introductions sucker less and have more showy flowers than the common lilacs. Some of our best lilacs are French hybrids that are over a century old.

Categorizing lilacs on the basis of color is difficult because the color varies with soil and climatic conditions and changes from the time of opening until the flower withers. However, this classification method is still practical and often used.

Another basis for classification is blooming time. Lilacs can be classified as early, mid, or late season bloomers. Most of the common lilacs or the French hybrids are mid-season bloomers. If your gardening space permits planting several lilacs, select some that bloom at different times to prolong the bloom season. At the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum, near Chaska, most of the lilacs bloom between May 15 and June 15.

The length of the bloom period (from the time the first flowers open until they fade) depends somewhat on the cultivar, but more on the weather. Flowers will last longer when the weather is cool and moist than when it is hot and windy. The length of the bloom period for individual plants is about 10-15 days.

Some of the newer lilacs are better for landscape plantings than the French hybrids because they are not as tall and leggy and produce fewer suckers. Most of the lilacs on the following list will grow 10-12 feet tall, although there are exceptions noted under the last column.

The following recommended list is based on observations and evaluations made at the University of Minnesota Landscape Arboretum and in the "Lilac Survey" compiled by the American Association of Botanical Gardens and Arboreta. Species names are in parentheses.



The James MacFarlane lilac shows the typical foliage of the late blooming lilacs.

Lilac	Single or double flower	Season of bloom †	Color and comments
Adelaide Dunbar	D	M	Reddish purple
Alphonse Lavallee	D	M	Lilac
Assessippi	S	E	Pale lavender
Belle De Nancy	D	M	Bluish lavender
Buffon	S	E	Pale lavender
Cavour	S	M	Bluish lavender
Charles Joly	D	M	Reddish purple
Charles Nordine	S	E	Lavender blue
Charles X	S	M	Deep lavender-rosy lavender
Charm	S	M	Bluish lavender
Chinese (chinensis)	S	M	Reddish purple
Congo	S	M	Reddish purple
Coral	S	L	Pink
De Miribel	S	M	Rosy Lavender
Desdemona	S	L	Lilac
Donald Wyman*	S	L	Deep purple lavender
Edith Cavell	D	M	White
Ellen Willmott *	D	M	White
Firmament	S	M	Blue
Henri Martin	D	M	Bluish lavender
Gertrude Leslie	S	E	White
Isabella	S	L	Pale lavender
Jacques Callot	S	M	Lavender
James MacFarlane	S	L	Pale pinkish lavender
Jan Van Tol	S	M	White
Japanese Tree Lilac	S	L	White; slow growing; 20-25 feet tall
Jessica	S	L	Pale purplish lavender
Katherine Havemeyer *	D	M	Pinkish lavender
Lucie Baltet	S	M	Pink
Ludwig Spaeth	S	M	Deep lavender
Macrostachya	S	M	Pale pinkish lavender
Mme. Antoine Buchner	D	M	Pale lavender
Mme. Lemoine	D	M	White
Marie LeGraye	S	M	White
Palibiniana (meyeri)	S	L	Pale lavender; very compact; probably 4 feet tall at maturity
Michel Buchner	D	M	Bluish lavender
Miss Kim (velutina)	S	L	Lavender; compact; probably 6 feet tall at maturity
Monge	S	M	Reddish purple
Montaigne	S	M	Reddish purple
Mount Blanc	S	M	White
Marechal Lannes	D	M	Violet
Mrs. Edward Harding	D	M	Lavender purple
Mrs. W. E. Marshall	S	M	Deep reddish purple
Mt. Baker	S	E	White
Necker	S	E	Pinkish lavender
Night	S	M	Dark reddish purple
Patience	S	L	Purplish lavender
Paul Thirion	D	M	Deep lavender
President Grevy *	D	M	Lavender blue
President Lincoln	S	M	Blue
President Poincare	D	M	Deep lavender
Red Wine	S	L	Rosy lavender
Royalty	S	L	Pale purplish lavender
Sister Justena	S	E	White
skinneri	S	L	Purplish lavender
Swarthmore	D	M	Light rosy lavender
Tom Taylor	D	M	Bluish purple
Vestale	S	M	White
Victor Lemoine *	D	M	Bluish lavender
villosa (Late lilac)	S	L	Pale lavender

† E = early, M = mid, L = late. * Indicates lilacs that are especially attractive.

Mention of commercial names does not imply endorsement nor does failure to mention a name imply criticism.

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