

RED BUTTE GARDEN

UTAH'S BOTANICAL GARDEN

Garden Plant Collections

Lilacs



Native to southeastern Europe and eastern Asia, lilacs belong to the genus *Syringa*. The name *Syringa* is derived from the ancient Greek word “*syrinx*,” which means “hollow stem,” referring to the straight, hollow young branches that were once used to make flutes. While there are only 12 species of lilac in the wild, worldwide horticulturists have created over 2,000 named hybrids and cultivars, most of which arise from the common lilac, *Syringa vulgaris*. Lilacs belong to the same family as the olive, ash, forsythia, and jasmine.

Lilacs are shrubs or trees that range in size from 3 feet to 35 feet high, depending on the species or variety. Most varieties produce heart- or spade-shaped leaves arranged in pairs along the stem, with a few species producing dissected leaves or leaves that encircle the stem.

Depending on the variety, the large panicles of typically fragrant, four-petaled flowers are produced from mid-spring to early summer. Although most are highly fragrant, some varieties have lost most of their fragrance through breeding programs that focused on creating unique-colored varieties. Flower color can range from white to pink to red or purple, and even yellow.

DESIGNING WITH LILACS

Lilacs are versatile shrubs that are attractive enough to be treated as a specimen. When not in

bloom, they provide a good backdrop for other plants. They can also be planted in small groups or rows to form a loose hedge. Many varieties grow quite large, so be sure to research the potential size and allow enough space for it to reach its mature size without the need for heavy pruning.

Although lilacs are not low water plants, they can grow well in arid environments with less water than you'd expect. They are fairly drought tolerant and can endure periods of low water without affecting their overall performance.

CARE AND MAINTENANCE

Lilacs are sun-loving plants and prefer at least six hours of sunlight per day. They can tolerate a partial sun environment but will develop a leggy habit and produce fewer flowers.

Lilacs grow best in fertile, well-draining alkaline soil, which makes them great shrubs to grow in Utah. A thin layer of compost spread around each plant in the spring provides nutrients, moderates soil temperature, and helps retain moisture in the soil so that less supplemental water is needed.

Like many flowering shrubs, lilacs will bloom better when pruned regularly. Shortly after blooming ends, remove any old, damaged, diseased, or dead wood, and then selectively prune out some of the oldest shoots

to encourage new, vigorous growth. Lilacs produce flower buds on old wood, meaning the buds for next year's blooms develop in summer. Plan on completing any pruning in early summer, otherwise you may end up removing some of next year's bloom. Lilacs should also be deadheaded immediately after flowers fade in order to direct the plant's energy to producing new growth and flower buds, rather than seeds.

Lilacs are generally healthy plants with very few insect or disease problems, however, one insect pest to watch out for is the lilac root weevil. During early summer, adult weevils feed on the leaves, creating characteristic notching on the leaf margins. The damage caused from foliage feeding is mostly aesthetic, meaning it does not harm the plant. However, the larvae live in the soil and feed on the roots, which can reduce the vigor of the bush over time. Control strategies include applying beneficial nematodes to the soil to combat the larva and trapping the adults as they crawl into the bush for their nightly feeding.

DID YOU KNOW

The first lilacs were introduced into the United States in the mid 1700s and have been popular ever since. They were grown in the first U.S. botanical garden in 1820, and George Washington and Thomas Jefferson grew them in their personal gardens.

In the right conditions, lilacs can live for hundreds of years and are sometimes the only remaining evidence of old abandoned homesteads.

The lilac (*Syringa vulgaris*) is so beloved that it was named the state flower of New Hampshire and the state bush of New York. Many cities across the country hold lilac festivals each spring.

WHERE TO SEE THIS COLLECTION

Lilacs are located throughout Red Butte Garden, with the greatest diversity of the collection along the bottom of the Floral Walk, a few re-blooming varieties in the Water Conservation Garden, and some impressive tree lilacs in the Fragrance Garden meadow. The best time to view this beautiful and fragrant collection is from mid-April to mid-May.

