

The Uncommon Lilacs - Something Old, Something New

by JOHN H. ALEXANDER III

The lilac is a favorite flower in New England where it is the state flower of New Hampshire. Its popularity also extends across the northern half of the United States and into the southern half of Canada. At the Arnold Arboretum, undoubtedly more visitors come to view the lilacs than to visit any other single collection.

We have a special fondness for this plant which is as foreign to our shores as our forefathers were. No species of lilac is native to the New World; *Syringa vulgaris*, the common lilac, is indigenous to the mountains of Europe within the countries of Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Roumania and Yugoslavia. But botanists did not discover it growing wild until 1828 when it was found in western Roumania. Cultivated for centuries in Turkey, it was brought from there to Vienna by 1563 and was common in Paris by the turn of the century. French, Dutch, and German nurserymen began selecting superior seedlings and by the early 1800's offered named clones for sale. An example is the cultivar 'Lucie Baltet' which originated in France before 1888 and is still considered to be one of the best pink-flowered varieties. So many cultivars originated in French nurseries, and in particular at the nursery of Victor Lemoine, that all selections of *Syringa vulgaris* have commonly been known as French Hybrid Lilacs.

It is these French Hybrid Lilacs that we particularly love. How many of us can walk by a lilac bush in bloom and not bend close for a draught of perfume, the mind conjuring up memories of springs past? With the advent of the smaller home, this plant, so deeply rooted in tradition, has been put aside for the contractor's *Taxus*. Not only the lilac's size, but the inferior quality of late summer foliage and the profuse suckering tendencies of some cultivars have discouraged many people from growing them. But now lilacs other than the common *Syringa vulgaris* and its cultivars are being discovered by gardeners. Many of these uncommon lilacs are smaller, some even small enough to be tubbed for the patio, and most sucker little if at all. They also are more resistant to mildew and leaf roll-necrosis.

Leaf roll-necrosis is typified by the interveinal and marginal chlorosis or yellowing of the leaf, and in severe cases by the inward curling

of the leaf so that the margins actually touch. A product of our urban environment, the disorder is believed to be caused by a combination of air pollutants. (6) Since different pollutants are found in varying quantities in different environments, conclusive evidence of resistance is not available. My statements of implied resistance to mildew and leaf roll-necrosis are based on observations at Rochester, New York (5) and on observations by the staff and volunteers of the Arnold Arboretum.

With few exceptions the lilacs mentioned here may be seen in the collection of the Arnold Arboretum. Most are available in the nursery trade. The best source list is available from the International Lilac Society, an organization of amateur and professional lilac enthusiasts. Requests for information on publications and membership should be addressed to Mr. Walter W. Oakes, Secretary, International Lilac Society, P.O. Box 315, Rumford, Me. 04276.

Syringa × *chinensis*

S. × chinensis is a garden hybrid that originated in the Botanic Garden at Rouen, France, about 1777. Its parents are generally believed to be *S. laciniata* and *S. vulgaris*. A beautiful shrubby plant, it can reach a height of 15 feet but is more likely to be 8 to 10 feet tall. Its flowers are lilac-colored and somewhat smaller than those of the common lilac, with which it blooms. An attractive advantage is that it produces clusters of flowers not only at the terminals, but from lateral buds down the stems, often forming an inflorescence 2 or more feet long.

Syringa × chinensis suckers only enough to be considered multi-stemmed and is certainly not a nuisance. The foliage is similar to that of the common lilac, but smaller and appears to be resistant to leaf roll-necrosis, although it is susceptible to mildew. Appearing in late summer, mildew does no serious damage to the plant and might well be tolerated in exchange for the great spring beauty and profuse flowering habits of this hybrid.

Syringa × chinensis has proved itself to be hardy in Zone II. (3) Two forms also are available: *alba*, white, and *sangeana*, lilac-red.

Syringa × *diversifolia*

S. × diversifolia is another garden hybrid. Open pollinated seed collected in the Arnold Arboretum in 1929 from a plant of *S. pinnatifolia* gave rise to hybrid seedlings. Alfred Rehder later determined these to be a cross with *S. oblata* var. *giraldii*, which was growing nearby.

The pale lilac to white blossoms are fragrant and attractive, appearing shortly before those of *S. vulgaris* and its cultivars. Usually



about 6 feet high and almost as broad, *S. × diversifolia* has a rather open habit. It is not very popular, but this past fall I was captivated by a cultivar that we received in 1949 from the now-defunct Upton Nursery Co. of Detroit, Michigan. Called 'Niveau', its deliciously fragrant, light pink flowers rebloom in early fall when its often pinnately cut foliage is an attractive burgundy and green. Preliminary observations have found it to be only slightly marred by leaf roll-necrosis and free of mildew, although all seedlings of this cross are not mildew resistant. Since all selections of *S. × diversifolia* do not rebloom to the extent 'Niveau' did last autumn, it is possible that the characteristic is not consistent; but an autumn-flowering lilac with burgundy fall foliage would be unusual and highly desirable.

Syringa × hyacinthiflora — see *S. oblata*

Syringa josikaea

The purple flowers of this Hungarian native open ten days to two weeks after those of the common lilac. *S. josikaea* is a very hardy plant, even to Zone II. (3) It grows to 12 feet, and has an upright, open habit. The attractive leaves, unlike those of the common lilac, are elliptic, glabrous above, and closely resemble those of the genus *Prunus*. They are resistant to mildew and leaf roll-necrosis.

Not a beautiful plant, the Hungarian Lilac has proved itself as a good parent in hybridization. Some very fine late flowering lilac cultivars have *Syringa josikaea* in their background. Of the several listed here, all were introduced by the University of New Hampshire, are resistant to mildew and apparently to leaf roll-necrosis.

'Agnes Smith' — single, white

'James Macfarlane' — single, pink (a true pink)

'Nellie Bean' — single, purple

Syringa julianae

This multi-stemmed but non-suckering shrub is usually a 6- to 8-foot mound of slender branches. Hardy to at least Zone V, it blooms with the common lilac. Unlike *S. vulgaris*, its pale-lilac panicles appear from lateral as well as terminal buds, making the flower clusters appear much larger. The small leaves are not troubled by mildew, but have exhibited slight leaf roll-necrosis.

The cultivar 'Hers Variety' has gracefully arching branches that are more weeping than those of any other lilac. This cultivar, when grafted on a 5- or 6-foot standard, makes an absolutely stunning patio plant.

Syringa laciniata

Formerly known as *S. persica* var. *laciniata*, the Cutleaf Lilac is now considered to be a true species, and *S. × persica* a hybrid. The leaves of *S. laciniata* are deeply lobed and present a dainty, feathery appearance; they also are resistant to mildew and leaf roll-necrosis.

This Chinese native is hardy to Zone V and forms a graceful many-stemmed, non-suckering 6-foot mound of a shrub. Pale lilac flowers are produced in season with *S. vulgaris*. Because they break from lateral and terminal buds, the small clusters of flowers often cover 18 or more inches of the branch tips.

The unique foliage, attractive flowers and graceful habit make this lilac a favorite of all who know it.

Syringa meyeri

S. meyeri was unknown to the western world until 1908 when F. N. Meyer of the U.S.D.A. found it being cultivated in China. Purple-lilac flowers grace this handsome lilac that blooms in season with *S. vulgaris*, but unfortunately lacks its fragrance. The foliage is small, less than 2 inches long, and is not troubled by mildew or leaf roll-necrosis. A multi-stemmed, compact shrub not usually more than 6 feet tall and as broad, it is hardy to Zone II. (3) Specimens at the Morden Arboretum, Morden, Manitoba, are given a hardiness rating of 9 and 9.5 on a scale of 10.



The correct name of a cultivar of *S. meyeri* known in the nursery trade as *S. palibiniana*, and "Dwarf Korean Lilac," (but in reality from China) has been the subject of much confusion. Consternation regarding the correct name of this cultivar prompted me to write Peter S. Green, Keeper of the Herbarium, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, England. Mr. Green, a former Arnold Arboretum staff member, is probably the world's foremost authority on the taxonomy of the genus *Syringa*. His reply follows:

S. palibiniana in a strictly taxonomic sense is a synonym of *S. patula*, and the popular dwarf lilac bearing this name, which is in widespread cultivation, is a misidentification. I believe it to be a cultivar of *S. meyeri* and intend to call it cv. 'Palibin'.

More compact than the type, 'Palibin' can, with a little pruning, be maintained at 3 feet in height. A more formal approach would be to graft it high on a standard. Potted up, this lilac might well be used as a patio plant. It is so hardy that, in the vicinity of Boston, one might get by with only a minimum of winter protection. Bags of leaves or a mound of wood chips protecting the root ball probably would be sufficient. If your climate is colder, or if your patio is a raised wooden deck where the root ball would be exposed to cold air from underneath, it would be safer to plunge the pot in the vegetable garden or other convenient spot for the winter.

Syringa microphylla

S. microphylla is a most handsome small shrub; its height is usually 6 feet and it may grow to be twice as wide. The ovate, mildew-resistant leaves are usually less than 2 inches long, giving the plant its common name, the Littleleaf Lilac. Unfortunately, the leaves are somewhat susceptible to leaf roll-necrosis. The flowers of the species are a light pink or pale lilac color. They open at the same time as the common lilac and frequently rebloom in August or September. This second bloom is somewhat sparse and not really significant in the landscape, but in late summer it is most enjoyable to have a vase full of these fragrant lilac blossoms gracing the dinner table. The deep pink flowers of the cultivar 'Superba' are even more effective, but its foliage seems more likely to display leaf roll-necrosis than the species. *S. microphylla* has proved itself hardy in Zone III and survives in Zone II. (3)

Syringa oblata

S. oblata closely resembles the common lilac, but blooms ten days to two weeks before it, usually about May 10 in Boston. It is best known by the varieties *S. oblata* var. *dilatata* and *S. oblata* var. *gir-*



Syringa microphylla.

aldii. Neither one of these is exceedingly beautiful in and of itself, but each, when crossed with *S. vulgaris*, has proved to be an excellent parent. This cross has given us the hybrid race *S. × hyacinthiflora*, which has greatly extended the flowering season.

Syringa × hyacinthiflora

S. × hyacinthiflora includes hybrids between *S. vulgaris* and two varieties of *S. oblata* — *S. oblata* var. *dilatata* and *S. oblata* var. *giraldii*. A number of cultivars of this group are available. Closely resembling *S. vulgaris* in appearance and fragrance, they flower a week or ten days earlier. They are very hardy, many of them having been bred at Dropmore Nursery, Dropmore, Manitoba, Canada, where winter temperatures of -50°F are not uncommon.

The *Syringa oblata* var. *giraldii* hybrids are often rather tall and leggy and benefit by frequent, ruthless pruning. Hybrids of *S. oblata* var. *dilatata* tend to be very broad shrubs, and are apparently less susceptible to leaf roll-necrosis. Although both *S. oblata* var. *dilatata* and *S. oblata* var. *giraldii* hybrids show resistance to mildew, those of the former are usually more resistant.

Some favorite cultivars are:

- (D) indicates *S. oblata* var. *dilatata* parentage
- (G) indicates *S. oblata* var. *giraldii* parentage

- 'Alice Eastwood' (G) double, magenta
- 'Anabel' (D) double, pink
- 'Assessippi' (D) single, lilac
- 'Doctor Chadwick' (D) single, mauve — nice compact habit.
- 'Esther Staley' (G) single, magenta
- 'Jewel' double, pink
- 'Necker' (G) single, pink
- 'Pocahontas' (D) single, pink

Syringa palibiniana — see *S. meyeri*

Syringa patula

S. patula, formerly known as *S. velutina*, is a tall shrub with an upright habit and pale lilac flowers. Hardy to Zone II, (3) this Korean native has foliage that is resistant to both mildew and leaf roll-necrosis. Although the species is not generally considered to be a horticulturally desirable shrub, it has given rise to an exceedingly beautiful cultivar, 'Miss Kim'.

Professor E. M. Meader of the University of New Hampshire collected seed of *S. patula* in the Poukhan Mountains of Korea in 1947. (8) One seedling, later named 'Miss Kim', became a slow-growing compact shrub with fragrant pale lilac flowers in spring and handsome burgundy-red foliage in the fall. The individual flowers, although somewhat small, are abundantly produced and appear at the same time as the later cultivars of the common lilac.

Syringa pekinensis

Forty-foot trees of *S. pekinensis* have been reported in China where this species is native, but on this continent it is usually a small tree, seldom reaching 25 feet. It is hardy at least to Zone III and what is probably the oldest specimen in the New World is maintained in Canada by the Ottawa Research Station. Their 76-year-old plant was grown from seed obtained from the Arnold Arboretum in 1902. The tree now approaches 25 feet in height and has a canopy of about 30 feet. The two main stems are 12 and 15 inches in diameter respectively and the bark is attractive and slightly exfoliating. (2)

The degree to which the bark exfoliates varies greatly between specimens. Some trees at the Arnold Arbortum show little or no exfoliation, while others display masses of orangey-brown bark strips from all but the oldest branches. The two plants with the most attractive bark, numbers 21634 and 21635-B, were both collected as

seed by Joseph Rock in 1926. Number 21634 is quite a bit broader and has a larger trunk than the latter; both approach 25 feet and may be taller. Their habit is reminiscent of that of an apple tree and they might be recommended for use anywhere a small low branching tree would be appropriate.

In the vicinity of Boston this lilac flowers about June 15. The creamy white flowers have a privet-like fragrance and closely resemble those of the other tree lilac, *S. reticulata*, with which it blooms. The foliage of this species is attractive and resistant to mildew. Some specimens are reported to have leaf roll-necrosis, while others appear to be resistant.

The exfoliating bark of this species offers year-round interest and makes the bare winter branches attractive. Because seedlings have varying bark characteristics and varying degrees of resistance to leaf roll-necrosis, only selected plants should be propagated and those, asexually.

The cultivar 'Pendula' is available, but unfortunately is not very pendant.





Exfoliating bark of Syringa pekinensis. Photo: J. Alexander.

Syringa × *persica*

S. × persica is a handsome, many-stemmed shrub about 6 feet in height and as much or more in width. Never found in the wild, it is apparently a hybrid that perhaps originated in the gardens of Persia, where it was cultivated for centuries. *S. laciniata*, which was formerly known as *S. persica* var. *laciniata*, is now considered to be one of the parents. The many small clusters of lilac flowers originate from both terminal and lateral buds forming a huge inflorescence that may extend 18 or more inches from the branch tip. These flowers are produced so abundantly that they weigh down the branches into graceful arches. The Persian Lilac blooms about the same time as the common lilac, but lacks the pleasant fragrance of the latter.

S. × persica is hardy to Zone II (3) and has shown good resistance to mildew and leaf roll-necrosis. The foliage and flowers are both small, but the number of flowers and the graceful appearance of this shrub make it easy to see why it is as valuable to today's gardens as it was to those of long ago.

Syringa potanini

First discovered in 1885 in Kansu, China, by the Russian explorer Potanin, *Syringa potanini* is a large shrub approaching 10 feet in height and as wide as it is tall. A non-suckering, multi-stemmed plant, it has small, densely pubescent leaves that are resistant to mildew but not to leaf roll-necrosis.

When the common lilac is in bloom, the Potanin Lilac abounds with fragrant pink flowers held in open erect panicles, and like *S. microphylla*, *S. potanini* produces a second, less abundant flush of flowers in late summer. Hardy to Zone V, this species has long been one of my favorites; it does best with plenty of space and clean air.

Syringa × *prestoniae*

In 1920, Isabella Preston of the Dominion of Canada, Central Experimental Farm, Ottawa, crossed the species *S. villosa* and *S. reflexa*, giving us the hybrid race *S.* × *prestoniae*. The result of this cross was the combination of some of the best qualities of both parents, greatly increasing the number of late lilacs.

Many people are prejudiced against the late lilacs because, in their opinion, late lilacs neither look nor smell like what a lilac should. The heavily veined leaves are elliptic and the flowers, if fragrant, hint at a scent of privet. I have found however, that there is a secret to liking these lilacs, and that is not to look at them as lilacs, but as pretty shrubs in their own right.



The Preston lilacs bloom about ten days to two weeks after the common lilac. Hardy to Zone II, they are non-suckering shrubs that often reach 8 to 10 feet in height. The not-very-fragrant flowers of most cultivars are usually pinkish-lilac colored. Some cultivars, like 'Fountain', have gracefully arching branches similar to *S. reflexa*; others are much more upright, like *S. villosa*; an example would be 'Isabella'. The foliage of most is large and coarse, not very attractive, but usually resistant to mildew and leaf roll-necrosis.

Since Miss Preston's time, others have duplicated this cross and of the following recommended cultivars, those marked with an * are the result of the work of others.

- 'Fountain' single, pink
- *'Hiawatha' (Skinner) single, pink
- 'Isabella' single, lilac
- *'Miss Canada' (Cumming) single, pink

Syringa reflexa

S. reflexa has been most valuable to us as a parent of the hybrid race *S. × prestoniae*. It is a graceful, broad shrub that can reach 12 feet in height. When in bloom, the panicles of pink flowers arch and hang down like those of wisteria. It is this pendant characteristic that gives the species its common name, the Nodding Lilac.

Hardy to Zone III and resistant to both mildew and leaf roll-necrosis, a good specimen of *S. reflexa* can be a beautiful plant. It is apparently a highly variable species; some authors have extolled its virtues while others downgrade it. Plants of *S. reflexa* growing in the Arnold Arboretum are not very thrifty, but Mr. W. W. Oakes of the International Lilac Society has informed me that his plant does well, although the blossoms only last a day or two. He recommends *S. × swegiflexa*, a hybrid between *S. sweginzowii* and *S. reflexa*, for the same habit, but improved flowering qualities.

Syringa reticulata

S. reticulata, the Japanese Tree Lilac, was formerly known as *S. amurensis* var. *japonica*. Sometimes reaching 30 feet, it makes a handsome small tree, but when young it may occasionally need some pruning to keep it single-stemmed.

In 1876 the Arnold Arboretum received seeds of this species from Japan. A beautiful specimen (AA #1111) from this original introduction is alive today in the Arboretum's collection. It is growing close to the road near the *Forsythia* collection.

Large clusters of privet-scented flowers cover this tree in June, as it is one of the latest of the lilacs to bloom. Hardy in Zone II, (3) this species has foliage that is resistant to mildew and leaf roll-



Syringa reticulata. Photo: J. Alexander.



necrosis. When the flowers and foliage are gone, the attractive cherry-like bark is visible, making this tree visually pleasing throughout the year.

The variety *mandshurica* blooms slightly before the type, and is shorter and less treelike.

Syringa villosa

S. villosa is a large, upright shrub, as much as 12 feet by 12 feet. Its pink flowers are held in upright panicles that open ten days to two weeks after *S. vulgaris* and give it the common name of Late Lilac. The large leaves are not troubled by mildew or leaf roll-necrosis.

Not a very beautiful or popular shrub, its chief attribute is that it is hardy to Zone II, and most suitable, therefore, for use in wind-breaks on the Northern Plains. But even for that purpose, *S. josikaea* might be a more attractive choice.



Syringa reflexa. From Curtis's Botanical Magazine. Vol. 16, fourth series, 1920.

	HEIGHT	HABIT	HARDINESS	COLOR	FOLIAGE PROBLEMS		TIME OF BLOOM	FRAGRANCE
					MILDEW	LEAF ROLL-NECROSIS		
<i>Syringa</i>			ZONE					
× <i>chinensis</i>	8-10 feet	spreading shrubby	II	lilac	susceptible	resistant	with <i>vulgaris</i>	
× <i>diversifolia</i>	8-10 feet	open	VI	pale lilac	some resistance	slight	before <i>vulgaris</i>	yes
<i>josikaea</i>	12 feet	upright	II	purple	resistant	resistant	10 days to 2 weeks after <i>vulgaris</i>	slight, not pleasant
<i>julianae</i>	6 feet	shrubby	V	pale lilac	resistant	slight	with <i>vulgaris</i>	yes
<i>laciniata</i>	6-8 feet	shrubby	V	light lilac	resistant	resistant	with <i>vulgaris</i>	
<i>meyeri</i>	6 feet	shrubby	II	purple-lilac	resistant	resistant	with <i>vulgaris</i>	no
<i>microphylla</i>	6 feet	shrubby	IV	light pink	resistant	slight	with <i>vulgaris</i> reblooms	yes
<i>oblata</i>								
× <i>hyacinthiflora</i>								
<i>oblata dilatata</i> hybrids	10 feet	spreading	III	several	varies with cultivar		before <i>vulgaris</i>	varies
<i>oblata giraldii</i> hybrids	12 feet	upright	III	several	varies with cultivar		before <i>vulgaris</i>	varies
<i>patula</i>	8-10 feet	open	II	pale lilac	resistant	resistant	with <i>vulgaris</i>	yes
<i>pekinensis</i>	25 feet	tree	III	creamy-white	resistant	in some seedlings	3 weeks after <i>vulgaris</i>	like privet
× <i>persica</i>	6-8 feet	shrubby	II	lilac	resistant	resistant	with <i>vulgaris</i>	no
<i>potanini</i>	8-10 feet	shrubby	V	pink	resistant	susceptible	with <i>vulgaris</i> reblooms	yes
<i>prestoniae</i>	10 feet		II	several	resistant	some cvs. susceptible	10 days to 2 weeks after <i>vulgaris</i>	like privet
<i>reflexa</i>	12 feet	shrubby	III	pink	resistant	resistant	10 days to 2 weeks after <i>vulgaris</i>	no
<i>reticulata</i>	25-30 feet	tree	II	creamy-white	resistant	resistant	3 weeks after <i>vulgaris</i>	like privet
<i>villosa</i>	10-12 feet	upright	II	pink	resistant	resistant	10 days to 2 weeks after <i>vulgaris</i>	like privet



Syringa prestoniae. Photo: D. Wyman.

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