

Lilacs at the Arnold Arboretum

The renowned lilac collection (*Syringa* spp.) at the Arnold Arboretum holds more than 400 lilac plants representing 179 different kinds. Many of these are cultivars or varieties, selected for horticultural merits such as flower size, fragrance, color, and overall growth habit. Others are the parents of many of today's hybrids. Lilacs are in the olive family; other relatives growing on Bussey Hill include ash trees and forsythia.

Although not a native plant, lilacs have been grown in North America since colonial times. Today, they enrich our landscape with color and fragrance for up to five weeks each spring. Every May, the Arnold Arboretum welcomes all to celebrate its magnificent display of these much beloved flowers.



1. *Syringa vulgaris* 'St. Margaret'

Syringa vulgaris, the common lilac, is one of two European lilacs. 'Syringa' comes from the Greek 'syrinx' meaning hollow pipe, as in syringe, and refers to the easily hollowed out stems of the lilac. This cultivar, introduced by Mary E. Blacklock, owner of Rowancroft Gardens, Ontario, has the heart-shaped leaves typical of *S. vulgaris* and has double white flowers.

2. *Syringa reticulata*

Look up and across the path to see the Japanese tree lilac. This is the oldest lilac in our collection, grown from seed sent to the newly-created Arnold Arboretum in 1876 by Professor W. S. Clark who was helping establish an agricultural school in Japan. This blooms a few weeks later than most tree lilacs with a creamy white flower. Two younger Japanese tree lilacs may be seen beyond *S. vulgaris* 'Prairie Petite' (11).

3. *Syringa oblata* var. *dilatata* 'Cheyenne'

Native to Korea and nearby regions of China, this bush lilac was introduced by the USDA in Cheyenne, Wyoming from seed collected in China. The leaves are oblate (wider in the middle) as is the earth, the distance around the equator being greater than that from pole to pole. This early-flowering species also offers fall interest, with its dark green leaves turning bronze, burgundy and maroon.

4. *Syringa* × *chinensis* 'Lilac Sunday'

A cultivar introduced by former Arboretum propagator Jack Alexander from cross-

pollinated seeds of *S. persica*, a cut-leaf lilac, sent by the Beijing Botanical Garden. The most promising and vigorous seedling was selected by Jack and named to honor the Arboretum's annual celebration in 1997. Fragrant, pale purple flowers spring from all sides of the long inflorescences, typically in time to live up to its name.

5. *Syringa vulgaris* 'Frederick Law Olmsted'

This cultivar is named in honor of the landscape architect of New York's Central Park and Harvard University's Arnold Arboretum. It was introduced in 1987 by Highland Park (also designed by Olmsted), located in Rochester, NY.

6. *Syringa vulgaris* 'Charm'

With its plump pink blossoms, 'Charm' was introduced by Theodore Havemeyer of Long Island, NY, who inherited a fortune from his family's sugar refining business. This allowed him to employ a staff of gardeners. He imported a selection of lilacs from Victor Lemoine of France in 1910 and he and his staff introduced 45 lilac cultivars before his death in 1936.

7. *Syringa* × *hyacinthiflora* 'Blanche Sweet'

Blanche Sweet was a famous silent movie actress in the early 1900s. In 1981, her fan club asked Father John Fiala, an Ohio priest with a passion for lilacs, to introduce a lilac in her honor. This is a cross between a European *S. vulgaris* and an Asian *S. oblata*. This cross was named

S. × hyacinthiflora after Victor Lemoine of France in 1876 noticed that the resulting blossoms of such a cross resembled hyacinths. Father Fiala introduced 78 lilac cultivars.

8. *Syringa vulgaris* 'Hulda'

Hulda Klager ran her own garden in Washington State, introducing more than 100 new lilac cultivars. When the Columbia River flooded her property in 1948, most of her lilac collection was destroyed. However, former customers brought her cuttings and, at the age of 85, she was able to restore her garden. 'Hulda', named in her honor in 1929, has rich purple flowers and a rounded habit, with great resistance to powdery mildew.

9. *Syringa vulgaris* 'Sarah Sands'

With purple flowers a similar color to 'Hulda', this upright lilac commands less space. Introduced by Theodore Havemeyer of New York, it was, like 'Charm', not added to the official Register of Lilacs until the 1940's, several years after his death.

10. *Syringa vulgaris* 'Krasavitsa Moskvya'

In 1947, Leonid Kolesnikov of Russia named this cultivar 'Beauty of Moscow' as in a beautiful woman from Moscow. The flower buds, described as "pink with an opalescent sheen," open to double white fragrant flowers.

11. *Syringa vulgaris* 'Prairie Petite'

This dwarf lilac rarely grows beyond 4 feet in height or width. Introduced by

the University of Nebraska in 1996 after experiments irradiating seeds thirty years earlier, this lilac is tolerant of drought, heat, and cold and is ideal for a small garden.

12. *Syringa vulgaris* 'President Lincoln'

This lilac was considered the blue by which other blues were measured when introduced in 1916 by John Dunbar of Highland Park, Rochester, NY. The name refers to a line in Walt Whitman's poem of 1865, "When lilacs last in the dooryard bloomed..." mourning the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln.

13. *Syringa vulgaris* 'Madame Lemoine'

Victor Lemoine, who introduced many 'French' lilacs in the late 1800s, had poor eyesight. Much of the delicate work of pollination, climbing a ladder to brush pollen from one lilac to the flower of another, was performed by his wife. Son Emile and grandson Henri continued Lemoine's collection after his death. Emile named this lilac in honor of his mother.

14. *Syringa × hyacinthiflora* 'Asessippi'

Frank L. Skinner of Dropmore, Manitoba introduced this lilac in 1932. 'Asessippi' has a showy, bushy habit with flowers from top to bottom, a rich fragrance, and is disease resistant, all qualities much sought after in a lilac. Skinner pioneered horticulture on the Canadian prairie north of Winnipeg, where only three months of the year are without frost. He

introduced 248 new plant varieties, many of them lilacs. At the age of 65 in 1947, Skinner married and had five children, his heirs preserving the Skinner Arboretum which is still open today.

15. *Syringa* 'Purple Haze'

This cross between two Asian lilacs, *S. oblata* and *S. protolaciniata*, was introduced in 2005 by Jack Alexander, then Arnold Arboretum plant propagator and a Jimi Hendrix fan. With long panicles of sterile flowers, this lilac does not need deadheading. 'Foxy Lady', a hybrid thought to have been the result of pollination by hawk moths, also introduced by Jack Alexander, is a little farther up the path.

16. *Syringa × diversifolia*

S. × diversifolia refers to the multiple shaped leaves on this lilac, one big leaf alongside two or three smaller leaves. In 1929, Alfred Rehder, Arnold Arboretum taxonomist, noted that *S. pinnatifolia* seedlings showed that the flowers had been pollinated by an *S. oblata* growing nearby. The white flowers of *S. × diversifolia* bloom early and then turn brown.

17. *Syringa protolaciniata* 'Kabul'

This cut-leaf lilac is also known as *S. laciniata* or *S. afghanica*. This particular cultivar, 'Kabul', was named for the city in Afghanistan by Peter S. Green, a former Arboretum propagator. 'Kabul' is one of the parent plants of *S. × 'Purple Haze'*.

18. *Syringa pinnatifolia*

This Chinese native was first discovered by plant explorer Ernest Henry Wilson in the mountains of Sichuan in 1904. This shrub blooms early in the season, producing small panicles of white flowers. Unique among lilacs, this species has pinnately compound leaves, meaning that each leaf is actually composed of many small leaflets.

19. Field of Lilacs

Enjoy three *S. × hyacinthiflora* cultivars: 'Necker' (Victor Lemoine, 1932) in the center of the field with 'Nokomis' and 'Pocahontas' (both Frank L. Skinner, 1936) to the right.

Record your favorite lilacs for scent, color, flower size, and shrub shape.

Continue your visit

Near the top of the Lilac Collection, head off to the right to visit the Leventritt Shrub and Vine Collection. Explorers Garden is located at the top of Bussey Hill Road and the Conifer Collection begins beyond the nut trees on Valley Road. If you continue on Valley Road, you may find rhododendrons in bloom. Cross Bussey Street to Peters Hill to enjoy the crabapple collection.

Visit arboretum.harvard.edu/explorer to navigate the landscape and search for plants from you smartphone.

