Lilacs

Fact Sheet FS1147

Cooperative Extension

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Lilacs are hardy plants and can be long lived provided that they have the correct environmental conditions. Plantings by early American settlers still survive today. Established lilacs can serve as a low maintenance plantings. Proper pruning and watering during drought conditions can produce greater than average numbers of flowers. Winter is needed in order to set flower buds, and lilacs only need protection in exceptionally windy sites.

Care of Lilacs

Lilacs need at least five to six hours a day of sun for flowering. Good air circulation reduces, but does not eliminate, powdery mildew, a fungus that appears on leaves. Good drainage and a soil pH of about 6.5 are essential. Mulch helps to retain soil moisture and prevent weed growth that can inhibit lilac growth. Mulch should be kept several inches from the bark, preventing ideal conditions for disease growth and hidden insect damage. As long as the lilacs are growing normally, fertilizer should not be needed. Too much fertilizer may be more damaging than too little. A soil test should be completed every three to four years to ensure that the proper soil pH is being maintained.

Deadheading right after bloom is not essential but may increase the quantity of flowers the following year. Removing spent flowers can improve the appearance of the lilac, but would be impractical to do on tall lilacs. When pruning, flower stems should be cut back to a set of leaves. Nevertheless, most lilacs that have never been deadheaded will bloom generously.

Pruning lilacs gives a more pleasing shape to the plant and keeps it from growing too tall. Lilacs can be pruned at any time but it is best done after flowering to avoid loss of bloom and before the end of June to avoid borer invasion. To rejuvenate a lilac plant, use a multiyear approach removing no more than one-third of the old thick trunks each year. Cut near the base of the plant as this will encourage new growth and will lessen the amount of thick stems. Damaged, diseased, or rubbing stems should be pruned out immediately. Suckers, those as thick as a pencil, may be left to replace the cut out stems.

Why Doesn't My Lilac Bloom?

- Is the plant getting at least six hours of sun each day? Full sun is best. Lilacs can be transplanted, ideally in early fall, to sites with more sun.
- Some lilac varieties bloom better in alternate years.
- How long has the plant been in the ground? Lilacs often take more than three years to flower after being moved.
- Was the lilac pruned too early and the flower buds removed, or too late the previous year so flower buds could not form?
- Does the lilac need rejuvenation pruning? Has it become leggy and so tall the flowers cannot be seen or smelled? Remove about one-third of the oldest thickest stems each year as described above.
- Excess fertilizer, even that running from the lawn, may stimulate suckering at the expense of flower buds. No fertilizer is better for lilac bloom than an excess of fertilizer.
- To extend the bloom period of lilacs in your landscape it is recommended that you select several varieties that bloom at different times of the growing season.

Lilac Diseases

- The single most common problem of lilacs is powdery mildew. Powdery mildew occurs well after the time of bloom and rarely harms the plant.
- Lilac borers can cause dieback of entire branches. Unfortunately, the damage is done to the stem before the problem is noticed. Dead and diseased branches should be removed. When removing entire stems concentrate on the older wood, as the lilac borers prefer them to the newer stems.
- Oyster shell scale forms brown or gray bumps on stems and can be controlled by pruning out heavily infected branches.
- It may be necessary to protect your lilacs from deer damage caused both by browsing and the rubbing of their antlers against the trunk in the fall and early winter. Enclosing small plants with wire or other protective structures may discourage rubbing. Repellants help against browsing.

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