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# How to Grow a Lilac Bush



Huge blooms, wonderful scent.

Photo Credit: Wally Patrick

Botanical Name: *Syringa* spp.

Plant Type: Shrubs and Bushes

Sun Exposure: Full Sun, Part Sun

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# Planting, Growing, and Pruning Lilacs

By [Catherine Boeckmann](#)**Last Updated:** March 19, 2025

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Lilacs truly smell like spring! Lilacs are among the most carefree spring-flowering shrubs and provide a sweet, haunting fragrance, too! Learn how to plant, grow, and prune your lilacs.

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Lilacs, said to symbolize the joy of youth and associated with spring's awakening, are hardy, easy to grow, and low-maintenance. Although they can reach heights of 5 to 15 feet (or more), depending on the variety, the ideal lilac shrub produces flowers at eye level—all the better to enjoy their sweet fragrance.

# About Lilacs

The common lilac, *Syringa vulgaris*, is well-loved for its toughness, reliability, and fragrance. In fact, lilacs are so tough that they can grow for 100+ years, often outliving the homes they were planted around. The fragrant flowers are good for cutting and are attractive to butterflies.

While the blooms are usually lilac/purple in color (from very pale to very dark), there are also lilac varieties in white and cream and even pink and yellow. Individual flowers can be single or double.

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In northern states, lilacs bloom for about two weeks from mid-to-late spring.

However, there are early-, mid-, and late-season lilacs, which, when grown together, ensure a steady bloom for at least six weeks.

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## PLANTING

Lilacs thrive in fertile, humus-rich, well-drained, neutral to alkaline soil (at a pH near 7.0). If your soil is in poor condition, mix in compost to enrich it. (Learn more about [soil amendments](#) and [preparing the soil for planting](#).) Choose or prepare a site that drains well. Poor drainage or pooling water can cause “wet feet,” potentially leading to root rot, stunted growth, and/or failure to flower. Test soil drainage by digging a hole 8 inches in diameter and 12 inches deep. Fill it with water; if it does not drain within an hour, choose another spot.

For the best blooms, lilacs should be planted in full sun, which is defined as being at least 6 hours of sunlight each day. Given less, they will not flower as well.

## When to Plant Lilacs

- Like most shrubs, lilacs can be planted in either spring or fall, although the latter is preferred.

## How to Plant Lilacs

- If you're lucky, a friend will give you a sucker, or offshoot, of the root system of one of their plants. The sucker will look pathetic at first, but dig a hole, backfill it with soil, and stick the sucker in. Then, water and wait. In 4 or 5 years, you'll be rewarded with huge, fragrant blossoms.
- Transplanting nursery-bought lilacs is also easy. If it's container-grown, spread out the roots as you settle the plant into the ground; if it's balled or burlapped, gently remove the covering and any rope before planting. Set the plant 2 or 3 inches deeper than it grew in the nursery, and work topsoil in

around the roots—water in. Then, fill in the hole with more topsoil.

- Space multiple lilac bushes 5 to 15 feet apart, depending on the variety.

## GROWING

- Each spring, apply a layer of compost under the plant, followed by mulch to retain moisture and control weeds.
- Water during the summer if rainfall is less than 1 inch per week.
- Lilacs won't bloom if they're overfertilized. They can handle a handful of 10-10-10 in late winter, but no more.
- After your lilac bush has finished blooming, spread some lime and well-rotted manure around the base. Trim the bush to shape it and remove suckers at the same time.

## How to Prune Lilacs: Pruning Lilacs

- Lilacs bloom on old wood, so it's critical to prune in the spring **right after they bloom**. If you prune later in the summer, you may be removing the wood. Note: If your lilac flower clus-

ters are getting smaller over a few years, it's time to prune!

- Every year after bloom, remove any dead wood. Prune out the oldest canes (down to the ground). Remove the small suckers. Cut back weak branches to a strong shoot. Cut back tall canes to eye height.
- The ideal lilac shrub has about 10 canes. If your lilac is old and in really bad shape, remove one-third of the oldest canes (down to the ground) in year one, half of the remaining old wood in year two, and the rest of the old wood in year three. Another option for old lilacs is to chop the whole thing back to about 6 or 8 inches high. It sounds drastic, but lilacs are very hardy. The downside to this option is that it takes a few years to grow back. The upside is less work and more reward, as the lilac will grow back, bursting with blooms.
- It must be recognized that severe pruning results in the loss of blooms for one to three years. For these reasons, a wise pruning program aims to avoid severe and drastic cuts by giving the bushes annual attention.



- Good Sucker Sense: Gertrude Jekyll, the 19th-century no-nonsense English horticulturist (1843– 1932), advocated a strenuous exercise: “When taking away suckers ... it is better to tear them out than to cut them off. A cut, however close, leaves a base from which they may always spring again, but if pulled or wrenched out, they bring away with them the swollen base.”

## Types

For early flowers, try *Syringa x hyacinthiflora* hybrids; they bloom 7 to 10 days before *S. vulgaris*. It's fragrant blooms attract butterflies and hummingbirds.

The most common and fragrant lilacs are of the *Syringa vulgaris* variety:

- Try ‘Charles Joly’, a double magenta flower, an early bloomer.
- Mid-season lilacs include ‘Monge’, a dark reddish purple, and ‘Firmament’, a fine blue.
- Late-season beauties include ‘Miss Canada’, a reddishpink, and ‘Donald Wyman’, a pink-purple flower.

Uncommon types/varieties include ...

- *S. x 'Penda'* Bloomerang Purple: flowers in spring, pauses, then flowers again from midsummer through fall
- Although common lilacs love cold weather, a few thrive as far south as Zone 8, including cutleaf hybrid *S. x laciniata*, with fragrant, pale lavender flowers, and *S. pubescens* ssp. *patula* 'Miss Kim,' with pale, lilac-blue blooms that fade to white.

### Small Lilacs

For gardeners, especially those in urban spaces, who just don't have the room for the traditional larger lilac, there are compact varieties! They'll even grow in a container on your patio or balcony.

- 'Baby Kim' grows only 2 to 3 feet high (and 3 feet wide) in a nicely rounded shape with purple flowers that attract butterflies. Extended hardiness from Zones 3 to 8.
- 'Little Lady' (*Syringa x*) is a compact lilac that matures to 4 to 5 feet tall and wide with dark pink buds that open to

lilac-pink flowers. Hardy in Zones 2 to 7.

- ‘New Age Lavender’ and ‘New Age White’ (*Syringa vulgaris*) are super-compact, growing from 4 to 5 feet tall and wide, and bred for mildew resistance. Their fragrant flowers attract butterflies and hummingbirds. Hardy to Zone 4.

[See more lilac varieties!](#)

## GARDENING PRODUCTS



## PESTS/DISEASES

- Prone to attack by [slugs](#) and snails.

- [Powdery white mildew](#) may appear after a summer of hot, humid weather. It may be unsightly, but it does no harm. Ignore it.

## WIT AND WISDOM

- To improve the flowering of lilacs, keep the grass from growing around them. A 16- to 24-inch circle of landscape cloth placed around the bushes and covered with bark or stone will keep the grass down.
- Force a winter bouquet from cut branches of lilac. Bruise the cut ends and set them in water. Spray the branches frequently. Keep them in a cool place until they bloom, then move to a warmer area for display.
- Poet Walt Whitman thought of lilacs when Abraham Lincoln died:  
*"When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd ... I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring."*
- Lilacs supposedly symbolize the joy of youth. Learn about more [flower symbolism here](#).
- The lilac belongs to the olive family, Oleaceae.

- Lilacs are the state flower of New Hampshire.

## COOKING NOTES

Lilac flowers are edible, but flavor varies among cultivars, from no flavor to “green” and lemony flavors. Gather insect- and disease-free blooms early in the day. Avoid any that are unopened or past their peak. Wash the flowers gently in cool water. Pat them dry and refrigerate until ready to use.

Consider making candied lilac flowerets for a special cake decoration: Separate the individual flowers. Using tweezers, dip each one into a beaten egg white, reconstituted egg white powder, or packaged egg whites. Then, dip the flower in finely granulated sugar. Set it aside to dry before placing it on a cake.

**SHRUBS AND TREES**

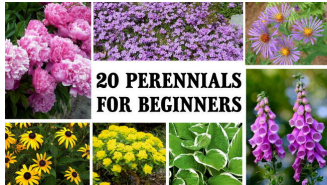
## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

## Catherine Boeckmann



Catherine Boeckmann loves nature, stargazing, and gardening so it's not surprising that she and The Old Farmer's Almanac found each other. She leads digital content for the Almanac website, and is also a certified master gardener in the state of Indiana. [Read More from Catherine Boeckmann](#)

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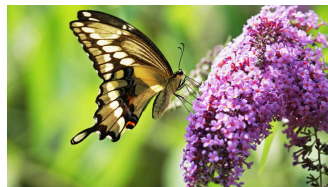
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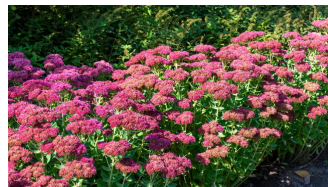
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## COMMENTS

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**Bee (not verified)** 5 hours 24 min ago

I make lilac simple syrup for lemonade and for sweet tea!

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**Jo (not verified)** 8 months 4 weeks ago

How to plant lilac trees from tree branch?

**REPLY**

**Dianne (not verified)** 9 months 1 week ago

I have a large lilac hedge surrounding our property on the north and east sides. Likely planted in the 1970's and about 10 feet tall. Last summer and again last week the leaves suddenly turned brown and dry. They bloomed nicely this last spring. Last summer was hot and dry. This summer rainy and cool. One garden center said blight another said stress. Any ideas?

**REPLY**

**The Editors** 9 months 1 week ago

Hi Dianne,

Sounds like the lilacs have been an important part of your property for many years. While it is hard to say for certain, there are a few things that



could be causing your leaves to brown and dry. First of all, it could actually be two different issues. Given last year was hot and dry, your lilacs could have been dealing with drought stress. This year, it could be a fungal or bacteria disease issue that is causing your lilacs to have issues.

If it is a disease issue like blight, it's actually common to occur when spring (not summer) weather is cool and wet. If that was the case during the spring each of the last two years, that might be the cause. If it is restricted to just certain areas of your lilacs, you can pruning affected areas, which will promote new growth. Just be sure to disinfect any tools after each use.

One other cause could be nutrient deficiencies. If you have not added fertilizer in recent times, you might want to get a soil test to see where any deficiencies might be and amend your soil accordingly.

Hope this helps!

REPLY

---

**Chris (not verified)** 9 months 2 weeks ago

Thank you for all the valuable lilac information; they're my absolute fave! I went out and bought 3 bushes today from an Amish farmer and all it says on the tag is "white lilac"; so this is going to be fun!

Thanks again,

Chris

REPLY

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**Anne (not verified)** 1 year ago

Lilacs are my favorite flower~

REPLY

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**Gail (not verified)** 1 year 1 month ago

I'm in zone 8B and always thought lilacs would not survive here. A friend gave me one a couple of years ago. I knew it couldn't take the hot Texas sun, so I planted it where it only gets morning sun. It bloomed last year and has even

more buds about to bloom today. It makes me happy.

**REPLY**

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**Megan Smith (not verified)** 1 year 9 months ago

I have a lilac bush with only 5-6 thick canes then maybe 20-30 branches. . The bush is a little over 4ft tall, only produced 1 Bloom so far. It is planted near landscaping stones at the end of a garden bed. It was hard-pruned this past winter (i know blooms will take another year or more). With it being planted near stones (on 1 side only), how can I encourage my bush to send out more shoots to grow wider/bushier? I'm in Zone 6B. No clue what variety i have, it bloomed a very light purple almost white bloom 1 year ago or so. It gets full sun

**REPLY**

**The Editors** 1 year 8 months ago

Hi, Megan,

After hard pruning, where everything is cut down to about 6 to 8 inches (on grafted plants, be sure to make the cut above the graft union), it will take a few years for the bush to re-establish and fill out, but you should see some nice growth coming up over the years. We're guessing the 4-foot-growth appeared this year after the hard pruning last winter? For the next few years, perhaps refrain from pruning drastically any further, to allow the plant to re-establish itself. Do, however, continue to remove any dead, diseased, or crossing branches.

In general, if a lilac bush needs just a tiny bit of pruning to keep it in shape, and to encourage bushy growth, you can cut the tips of branches that are too tall back to a side shoot or bud. This will encourage that side shoot to grow outward instead of the tip continuing to grow upward. Deadheading spent flowers can also help the plant focus its energy on growing shoots and new flowers. Remove any suckers that pop up near the base of the plant.

Make sure that the plant has good growing conditions; full sun, as you have, is great for it. Also check if it has well-draining soil. Clay soil can slow its growth. Lilacs do best in neutral soil pH.

Hope this helps!

**REPLY**

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**Hugh Nugent (not verified)** 1 year 11 months ago

I have a lilac, approximately 15 feet tall, full sun, soil etc. is in good condition. Unfortunately there is no evidence of growth. There was an ice storm in our area in April, however I have a second lilac that bloomed just fine.

The one in question we lost approximately one third due to ice storm damage. I trimmed back the damaged portion. Please note that I am approximately 40 kilometres north of Montreal Quebec and the lilac in question was planted in 1999.

Any advice would be greatly appreciated.

PS as mentioned I have another lilac which is fine and I have two Japanese Lilac Trees that are growing without any issues.

REPLY

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