

Lilacs – The Basics

By: Pam Bergstrom, Lower Elkhorn Natural Resources District Forester

I am dedicating this article to one of my coworkers. Why? Because he can't stand lilacs! As for me, I think they are a fascinating shrub that is long lived, has a beautiful fragrance, and is tough enough to grow here in Nebraska. For me, growing up in rural Nebraska, the smell of lilacs was a sign that either Mother's Day was coming, school was about to let out, or first cutting alfalfa was right around the corner. Today, the smell of a lilac takes me back to simpler days and I have a feeling I'm not the only one.

Something that fascinates me is the fact lilacs are not native to North America. What?! But they are planted just about everywhere! Sorry to burst your bubble, but lilac is not a native shrub, it was brought over from Eastern Europe in the late 1700s for landscaping and also as a source of good luck. You see, lilac is an important shrub to eastern Europeans because it was thought to bring good luck to those who planted it and was often planted near the kitchen or the living room of homes to also protect those who dwelled inside the house. In Russia, if you find a lilac with 5 flower petals you are to make a wish and then eat the flower. IF you do so, your wish will come true! Now, I wouldn't recommend putting lilac into your diet, but one flower shouldn't hurt you.

And, if you are in the market for lilacs you are bound to find one that fits your needs! You see, there are over 2,000 lilac varieties. However, the Lower Elkhorn NRD only provides the common lilac and the flower colors varies from pink to lilac to white and even a few blues.

The first thing about planting lilacs is to find a place that is well drained of water and in full light with at least 8 hours in the sun for the optimal production of flowers. They can grow in a wide variety of soils, but sand seems to stress them out, especially when it comes to the summer when it gets hot and dry. After you plant your lilac, make sure you give it plenty of water to get rid of any air bubbles and to

also keep the roots moist. After that initial watering, it is best to check the soil to see if moisture is still present within the soil particles. When it is dry, give the shrub a good gallon of water slowly to let the water soak down. Check the soil moisture once a week and to keep the soil moist, it is best to put down wood chips around the shrub, but remember to keep one inch away from the base of the shrub and only pile the mulch 4 – 6 inches high. Stay away from putting rocks or rubber down around the shrub as this will only attract heat and also put pressure on the roots.

What about pruning? Lilacs can be long lived and if you have seen older lilacs they have shoots that are long and sometimes hollow in the center. The best thing to do about those types of branches is to prune them down to the ground while the shrub is still dormant in the late winter/early spring. This will inspire new growth to occur, but it will also infringe on the production of flowers. If you want to still have the flowers in the spring, then you will do your planting right after the shrub has bloomed. A word of advice is after you have pruned one shrub bush; disinfect your pruning equipment with either bleach, rubbing alcohol, or disinfectant wipes before going to the next shrub or tree. Think of it this way, you want the doctor to sanitize all his equipment before going onto the next patient, right? So you need to sanitize your equipment so you don't spread diseases.

Lilacs aren't without disease or insect problems. The biggest disease problem is more of a cosmetic problem, think of it as acne. It is called powdery mildew and it happens when we have humid weather and the lilac is shaded. The best way to avoid powdery mildew is to purchase cultivars or varieties of lilacs that are not susceptible to powdery mildew and make sure there is plenty of space between plants and the shrub is in full sunlight. Once the shrub gets it, it may abort some of the more heavily infested leaves, but won't die from it.

The insect that causes the most problems with lilac is simply called the lilac borer. As a larvae, it will burrow into larger stems of the shrub and tunnel through that stem causing the stem to become

weak and fall over or die. This doesn't kill the shrub, but it can reduce the amount of flowers the shrub produces. This is why it is important to prune out the older, larger stems of the shrub.



Photo From Old Farmer's Almanac



Photo From www.todayshomeowner.com