

2002

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Recommended Citation

Hinkamp, Dennis, "Lilacs: Tough, Beautiful and Fragrant" (2002). *All Archived Publications*. Paper 907.
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GARDEN NOTES

LILACS: TOUGH, BEAUTIFUL AND FRAGRANT

By Dennis Hinkamp

April 2002

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This year lilacs will be a particularly good shrub choice for planting. Not only are they pretty, but they also are one of the most drought-tolerant plants, says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. Have you ever noticed those old, abandoned homesteads in the country where no one has lived for years? The two plants that survive and even flourish years after the house has been vacated are lilacs and junipers.

With the concern over water shortages in mind, plant lilacs which can live and even thrive on a minimum amount of water, Goodspeed recommends. Other plants in our landscape cry and complain about their lack of care, but not lilacs. This tough plant keeps on growing and thriving even when we wish it would die back a little.

Lilacs are native to Europe and Asia, he says. They were brought to America in the early 1700's, and were carried across the plains to Utah by the pioneers. Lilacs were one of the few plants tough enough to survive in the back of a wagon.

Lilacs can be planted almost anywhere as long as they get full sun, he adds. Their blossom production declines if they get too much shade. They can adapt to nearly any soil type, but do not like being over-watered--preferring a dry location to a wet one. Lilacs require little, if any, extra fertilizer. If their growth is slow, apply a small amount of nitrogen fertilizer in the early spring.

Lilacs come in a multitude of different colors and sizes. The Japanese tree lilac can grow as tall as 30 feet. It has white, slightly fragrant flowers, and makes a nice, small, shade tree for patios and decks.

The dwarf Korean lilacs can reach a height of more than six feet, but are relatively slow growing, so they stay about three to four feet high for several years, he says. They can easily be pruned to stay small. They have a mounded shape, and fragrant, purple flowers.

The common lilac has hundreds of varieties ranging in color from deep purple, to red, and even white, Goodspeed says. Most nurseries sell a few of the more popular varieties. Prune lilacs to keep them about five to seven feet tall. Left unpruned, lilacs can grow more than 25 feet high, which puts the wonderful blossoms out of sight and reach. An annual pruning can keep them at a desired height.

Once the plant is finished flowering, remove a few of the older canes at the base of the

plant. This helps invigorate new growth, removes the older, taller canes and keeps the plant at the desired height.

Never top a lilac, he says. Pruning does not stop growth, it only redirects it. Topping a lilac produces a witches-broom effect at the top of the cut cane. Excessive top growth shades out the base reducing new growth, and simply looks wrong. It also does little to control the plants height.

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This publication is issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work. Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Jack M. Payne, Vice President and Director, Cooperative Extension Service, Utah State University. (EP/04/2002/DF)