Lilacs are among the most carefree spring-flowering, multi-stemmed, deciduous shrubs (or small trees), well-loved for their toughness, reliability, and fragrance. Clusters of small, four-lobed flowers are borne in conical to narrow pyramidal clusters (panicles) up to eight inches long that stand out from the green heart-shaped leaves.

Carl Linnaeus first described the lilac genus, Syringa, in 1753. The name is derived from the ancient Greek word syrinx, meaning pipe or tube. The stems of the common lilac have a spongy pith that can be removed, leaving hollow tubes that were used to make pan-pipes.

Syringa vulgaris, the common (vulgaris) lilac, originated in southeastern Europe; other species came from Western Asia. The French imported lilacs and developed many new varieties that made their way to North America.

Lilac blooms go far beyond every imaginable shade of lilac/purple from very pale to very dark. Look for lilacs in hues of red, pink, blue, yellow, cream and white—even picotee (white-edged, deep purple ‘Sensation’). The color may change from bud to bloom and as the flowers mature. Individual flowers can be single or double.
Lilac Species
There are about 30 different species of lilac. Some of the best-known are:

- **S. x chinensis** - Chinese Lilac. Grows 8 to 12 feet tall and 6 to 10 feet wide. Hardy to Zone 3. Rose-purple flowers. Susceptible to powdery mildew.

- **S. x hyacinthiflora** – Early Flowering Lilac. Grows 10 to 12 feet high and wide. Hardy to Zone 3. Exquisitely fragrant flowers may be single or double, opening 7 to 10 days before those of the common lilac. Unlike other lilacs, the foliage has multi-season interest, turning shades of gold, red, or purple in fall. Resistant to powdery mildew. Attracts butterflies and hummingbirds. ‘Pocahontas’ panicles are packed with fragrant, single, rich violet flowers.

- **S. josikaea** - Hungarian Lilac. Grows 8 to 10 feet tall and 10 to 12 feet wide. Hardy to Zone 5. Late-blooming with deep lilac-purple flowers.

- **S. laciniata** - Cutleaf or Feathered Persian Lilac. Grows 6 to 8 feet tall and wide. Heat tolerant—hardy from Zones 4 to 8. Can grow in partial shade. Very unique looking with airy, finely textured foliage—lacy, deeply cut, dark green leaves that turn yellow-green in fall. Loose panicles of fragrant, soft lavender flowers are borne on willowy, arched branchlets.

- **S. pubescens subsp. Patula (Syringa patula) ‘Miss Kim’** – Manchurian or Korean Lilac. Slow-grower reaching 6 to 8 feet tall and wide. Heat tolerant—hardy from Zones 3 to 8. Late flowering, with purple buds that open to very fragrant, lavender blue blossoms that attract butterflies and hummingbirds. Three-season interest with burgundy-tinged leaves in fall.

- **S. meyeri** - Meyer or Korean Lilac. Grows 5 to 8 feet tall and 6 to 10 feet wide. Hardy to Zone 3. Fragrant, pale lilac to violet-purple flowers bloom in small, dense clusters that attract butterflies and hummingbirds.

- **S. persica** - Persian Lilac. Grows 4 to 8 feet tall and 5 to 10 feet wide. Hardy to Zone 4. Intoxicatingly fragrant, showy, pale violet flowers attract butterflies.

- **S. x prestoniae** - Preston (Canadian) Lilac. Grows 8 to 12 feet tall and 6 to 10 feet wide. Late-blooming—two weeks or more after common lilacs. Exceptionally hardy—to Zone 2. ‘Miss Canada’ is upright, growing 6 to 12 feet tall and wide; reddish buds open to rosy pink flowers that attract butterflies. ‘Redwine’ grows 8 to 12 feet tall and 6 to 10 feet wide; magenta flowers with a spicy fragrance that attracts butterflies and hummingbirds.

- **S. reticulata** - Japanese Tree Lilac. Grows to 30 feet tall and 20 feet wide. Hardy to Zone 3. Creamy white, upright flowers. Attracts hummingbirds and butterflies. ‘Snowdance’ grows 15 to 20 feet tall and 15 to 18 feet wide, producing a profusion of large clusters of fragrant, tiny, creamy white blooms in early summer, followed by loose clusters of seed capsules that last into winter. Reddish-brown peeling bark completes the four-season interest.

- **S. vulgaris** – Common Lilac. Grows 12 to 16 feet tall and 8 to 12 feet wide. Hardy to Zone 3. Lilac-purple flowers attract hummingbirds and butterflies. Shrubs are deer- and rabbit-resistant.

Some specific Lilac varieties are listed on the next page:
Heat Tolerant
- Blue Skies quickly grows to 10 feet tall and 6 feet wide, with both cold- and heat-tolerance (Zones 3 to 8), this outstanding shrub with spectacular clusters of lavender-blue flowers can be used in firewise gardens.
- Old Glory grows 8 to 11 feet tall and 10 to 12 feet wide with an abundance of fragrant, purple-blue flowers that attract pollinators in Zones 5 to 8.
- S. x sinensis Lilac Sunday arches to 10 feet tall and wide, blooming profusely from lateral buds all along the stem as well as the typical branch tips with sweetly scented, lavender flowers. Hardy in Zones 3 to 8.
- S. x oblata Betsy Ross grows 8 to 10 feet tall and wide. Good hardiness ranging from Zones 2 to 8. Showy panicles up to 14 inches long packed with fragrant, pure white flowers that glow as the light fades at twilight. Attracts butterflies and hummingbirds.

Small in Stature
- Baby Kim is the smallest lilac, growing only 2 to 3 feet high and 3 feet wide. Its shiny green leaves beautifully set off the non-fading, purple flowers that attract butterflies. Hardy from Zones 3 to 8.
- Little Lady (S. x) is a new compact introduction that matures to 4 to 5 feet tall and wide with dark pink buds that open to lilac pink flowers.
- New Age Lavender and New Age White (S. vulgaris) are compact, growing from 4 to 5 feet tall and wide and were bred for mildew resistance. Their names perfectly describe the colors of their fragrant flowers that attract hummingbirds and butterflies. Hardy to Zone 4.
- Pearl Potion (S. meyeri) has an upright shape, growing 4 to 5 feet tall and 5 to 7 feet wide. Fragrant, pure white flowers bloom in late spring perfuming the air like their big cousins. Hardy to Zone 3.
- Pintkini Lilac (S. x prestoniae) is now for 2022. Upright, compact and cold hardy to Zone 2, this bin-blooming variety is great for small spaces and early season blooms in cold climates.
- SCENTARA® lilacs (S. x hyacinthiflora) are ideal for warm climates to Zone 8 and are hardy to Zone 2. With a dwarf form and some of the best fragrance combined with good resistance to powdery mildew, they fit into any garden. Pura® grows 4 to 6 feet tall and wide, bearing deeply scented, pure purple flowers. Double Blue® Blue grows 6 to 8 feet tall and wide and has large clusters of highly perfumed, lavender-blue, double flowers.
- Sugar Plum Fairy (S. vulgaris) grows to 4 feet tall and 5 feet wide. Hardy from Zones 3 to 8, it’s a late bloomer bearing spicy scented clusters of rosy pink flowers that attract butterflies and hummingbirds.
- Tinkerbelle grows to 6 feet tall and 5 feet wide. Hardy to Zone 3, it has wine-red buds that open to deep pink flowers and a spicy fragrance.

Reblooming Lilacs
- S. x Josee is not only small and a rebloomer, it is hardy from Zones 3 to 9. The 4- to 5-foot mound is highly fragrant with lavender-pink flower clusters that bloom heavily in spring and continue to blossom through summer.
- S. meyeri ‘Palabin’- Dwarf Korean Lilac is a spreading shrub that grows 4 to 6 feet tall and 5 to 7 feet wide, bearing reddish-purple buds that open to pale purple flowers with a jasmine-like scent. It flowers in spring and then again from summer to frost. Hardy to Zone 3.
- Bloomerang Lilacs are reblooming lilacs with a profusion of stunning, sweetly scented clusters of star-like flowers in spring that cover the plant and then rebloom from midsummer until the first frost. The fragrant flowers attract butterflies and other pollinators and are both disease and deer resistant. Hardy to Zone 3.
Placing Tips
- Most lilacs do well in Hardiness Zones 3 to 7—climates that provide a chill period in winter. To find your hardiness zone, click here and enter your zip code.
- Lilacs grow best in full sun, so avoid planting them where they will be shaded for more than a few hours.
- Lilacs need good drainage and fertile soil. Soil should retain sufficient moisture to nourish the root system yet drain freely when rainfall is abundant.
- Test drainage before planting: Dig a hole 8 inches across and 12 inches deep. Fill it with water. If any water remains in the hole after an hour, choose another planting area.
- Lilacs love fertile, slightly alkaline soil. If your soil is very acidic, add garden lime in the fall.
- Choose a planting space that will allow for future growth. Read the plant label for the height and spread of the mature plant.
- Dig the planting hole as deep as the root ball and twice as wide.
- Set the plant in the hole; it should be at the same soil level as it was in its container.
- Fill in around the sides with soil. Press it in firmly. Water well.

Growing Tips
- Water your lilacs regularly for the first couple of years—at least 1 inch of water a week.
- Apply granular organic fertilizer early each spring at the base of the plant. Water it in well. Buds are set the previous year, so the fertilizer feeds this year’s leaves and next year’s blooms.
- Annual pruning is not necessary, but cutting off spent flowerheads within a month after bloom helps the plant set more flowers next year.
- Cut back off root suckers as they appear to keep the common lilac from spreading into a colony.
- Rejuvenate an overgrown plant or one that blooms sparsely by cutting one-third of the oldest branches back to 12 to 15 inches from the ground. Do over a three-year period to refresh the plant without sacrificing blooms.
- Powdery mildew can be unsightly, but generally does not harm the plant. You can make a spray of 2 tablespoons of baking soda in a gallon of water with a couple of drops of Ivory liquid. Spray it on the leaves, but not if the temperature is over 80°. The alkalinity of the solution helps to kill the fungus.
- Rake Fallen leaves from around the plant in autumn. If you had powder mildew or any disease, bag them and toss in the garbage, otherwise add them to your compost pile.
- Anytime: Prune out any dead or broken branches from storm or winter damage.