

2022 Year of the Lilac

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The National Garden Bureau designated 2022 as the Year of the Lilac. When one thinks of this old-fashioned shrub that can live for 100 years, aromatic blossoms come to mind but so might a large, overgrown shrub.

Today's lilacs are bred for more manageable size, extended bloom time or rebloom, and heat tolerance. Something future plants might need more of with weather extremes.

There are now lilacs that range in size from two to 12 feet tall. If you count Japanese tree lilac, which is a true lilac, then the height range goes up to 35 feet. Tree lilac is a small ornamental tree, not a multi-stemmed shrub like most lilacs. It blooms in June with white blossoms.

There are reblooming lilacs that bloom in spring and then off and on again during summer. And while purple flowered lilacs usually have the strongest scent, flower color ranges from purple to lilac, pink and white.

If planting natives is important to you, know that lilac was brought here from Eastern Europe and Asia. While not native, it has value for being a hardy shrub and good pollinator plant. Providing pollen and nectar at a time when fewer plants are in bloom.

Consider checking out some of the newer cultivars at local garden centers. If you search Year of the Lilac online, the National Garden Bureau provides a listing of many different cultivars along with their characteristics.

While a tough shrub that tolerates poor conditions, lilac performs best with full sun, medium moisture, and fertile, well-drained soil. They are best planted where there is only a few hours of shade each day. Because they prefer alkaline soil, they do well in Nebraska and we do not see iron chlorosis problems.

A well-drained soil remains moist but allows excess water to drain away after heavy rains or in yards overwatered with irrigation systems. A loam soil high in organic matter is typically fertile enough. This is especially true if lilacs are grown near a fertilized lawn. In this case, fertilization should not be needed.

Issues that may arise with lilac are root suckers, powdery mildew, and scale insects. If not wanted, pull, cut or dig root suckers as soon as they are noticed. Mildew causes leaves to appear coated with white flour. It is unsightly but rarely harms a plant. Oystershell scale can cause individual stems to die but not the shrub itself.

When and how to prune lilac is a common question. Since these shrubs bloom early in spring, they develop flower buds the previous summer. If you don't want to remove flower buds, wait until just after blooming to prune lilacs.

Like all shrubs, thinning cuts are recommended over heading back cuts that shorten the shrub. Thinning selectively removes a stem near the ground or at the point it attaches to another stem. Thinning every few years prevents shrubs from becoming a tangled mass of stems bare of leaves in the center with blooms only on outer branch tips.

For overgrown and neglected lilacs, the best solution might be renovation pruning where the shrub is cut all the way to the ground in late winter or early spring. As new stems grow, be sure to thin them out every few years.