

# Lilac Newsletter

Vol. V, No. 1, January, 1979.

INTERNATIONAL LILAC SOCIETY

*INTERNATIONAL LILAC SOCIETY* is a non-profit corporation comprised of individuals who share a particular interest, appreciation and fondness for lilacs. Through exchange of knowledge, experience and facts gained by members it is helping to promote, educate and broaden public understanding and awareness.

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ORNAMENTAL SHRUBS AND WOODY CLIMBERS

by: F.L. Skinner\* - Dropmore, Manitoba

Acknowledgment: The foregoing material is taken from

Chapter VII - ORNAMENTAL SHRUBS AND WOODY  
CLIMBERS

Horticultural Horizons, published by Manitoba  
Department of Agriculture and Conservation,  
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, a work which Dr.  
Skinner completed in 1966

Editor

SYRINGA (LILAC)

The fact that Syringa oblata var. dilatata had come unscathed through a winter that had severely injured quite a few of the named varieties of the common lilac led me to think that hybrids between it and the French varieties would prove sufficiently hardy to stand most of our winters without injury, so in 1921, when S. oblata var. dilatata flowered, I crossed it with several varieties of the common lilac and secured hybrids, many of which flowered when three years old, from seed, although Syringa vulgaris usually takes seven or eight years to start flowering when grown from seed. These first hybrids of S. oblata var. dilatata formed compact bushes that flowered very freely, were very fragrant, and did not sucker like the common lilac. However, I did not expect that they would have more than local appeal, and did no further breeding with them until the Morton Arboretum at Lisle, Illinois, said some very nice things about them. I then set to work to try to duplicate the range of colour and form found in the Lemoine lilacs, and in this I have had a considerable degree of success. Some nice forms are appearing in the pale blue and pink shades; and some of the single, white forms are better than any of the European varieties that have flowered at Dropmore. Individual florets up to 1 1/2 inches across have been measured, and double spikes up to eight inches long and broad are common.

Dr. John Wister of Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, has given one of these single white varieties a rating of XXXX.

I have designated these hybrids of Syringa oblata var. dilatata as the "American lilacs" because so far they have been bred only on this continent and tests to date show that they are likely to extend the range of the lilac both further north and south than the presently named forms of S. vulgaris thrive. At Beaverlodge, Alberta, they stand severe winters better, and they also thrive better under the warm winter conditions at the University of California.

While my work with Syringa oblata var. dilatata is the most important, I have made many other crosses within the genus Syringa. I was successful in raising hybrids between S. vulgaris and S. villosa but the seedlings had leaves like the male parent, S. villosa, only heavily blotched with white. They never flowered, and have long since been discarded.

Many interesting hybrids have been raised between various species of the villosa section, usually having S. villosa itself as one of the parents. Species such as S. reflexa and S. sweginzowii are not hardy at Dropmore, and I had to secure pollen of these tender species from the Arnold Arboretum. This dry pollen was more difficult to work with than the fresh material, and it sometimes took several attempts before I was successful in securing hybrids. Miss Isabella Preston and I started to work with S. reflexa at the same time but she was able to go to Boston for fresh pollen with the result that she succeeded in raising hybrids either two or three years before I did. The pollen sent me from the Arnold Arboretum must have been collected from a different bush than that from which Miss Preston secured hers, for while her hybrids have all long loose panicles mine are much narrower and compact and have more red in their colour. 'Donald Wyman', one of my hybrids, is one of the reddest, and holds its colour better at the Arnold Arboretum than any of the other hybrids of this section.

At Dropmore hybrids in the villosa section of the lilac have been raised with almost as wide a range of colour, as is to be found in Syringa vulgaris, ranging from pure white through

pale pink to quite a deep reddish hue, and from reddish-purple to blue. At present, however, there is little demand for this type of lilac, and only a few have been named.

About ten years ago Syringa amurensis flowered quite early and I was able to get pollen of it while a panicle of one of the Prestoniae lilacs was in condition for working. All flowers and buds on this bush not in condition for emasculating were removed and pollen of S. amurensis applied to the emasculated flowers. About a dozen plants were raised from this cross, only two of which showed any sign of the male parent, and these only in the leaves. The second generation of these show leaves that are even more like S. amurensis but have not yet flowered.

Crosses have been made between the dilatata hybrids and S. pinnatifida but none of these has been sufficiently hardy to flower without protection, and I have not been able to secure the F<sub>2</sub> generation.

Though I have raised crosses between what is usually cultivated in this country as Syringa persica and the dilatata hybrids, so far all my efforts to raise hybrids between the cut-leaved form of S. persica and other lilacs of the vulgaris type have failed.

Hybrids of Syringa microphylla are just starting to flower, and, though nothing really startling has yet appeared, one did have flowers that were a little brighter pink than the variety 'Esther Staley', and it is possible that it may be useful in breeding a clear pink lilac on a compact bushy plant.

I have found lilacs very easy to emasculate. I just grasp the base of the flower bud firmly between the thumb and forefinger of the left hand and the tip of the bud in the same fingers of the right hand and give a smart jerk. In most cases the floral envelope will come off clean without injury to the pistil. The whole secret of success lies in getting the buds at just the right stage, just before they are ready to open. All open flowers are first removed, taking care to see that their ovaries are also removed; and all buds on the panicle not yet fit to emasculate are also removed.

Hybrids between Syringa velutina and S. pubescens have also been raised. These have more compact panicles of flowers that are slightly larger than those of either parent. The panicles are also larger, and the flowers are longer-lasting than those of S. velutina. So far, I have been unsuccessful in crossing this hybrid, named Syringa 'Skinneri', with any lilacs of the vulgaris group.

In the discussion which follows, on individual varieties of Syringa developed at Dropmore, it will be convenient to consider them in groups according to their parentage.

Syringa vulgaris x S. oblata var. dilatata

Some 17 varieties developed from the cross S. vulgaris x S. oblata var. dilatata have been named. In general, they are compact bushes, of a non-suckering growth habit, and are free-flowering, with fragrant flowers.

Four of these varieties have double flowers: 'Evangeline' has lilac-coloured flowers, and 'Gertrude Leslie' is a very early-blooming white. 'Swarthmore' is a profuse bloomer with compact spikes, eight to nine inches long, its pinkish buds becoming mauve; streaked with white, as they open. 'Tom Taylor', introduced in 1962 has dark violet flowers, similar in shape to those of 'President Grevy'.

Of the varieties with single flowers, three are white: 'Mount Baker' with very large flowers; 'Sister Justina' with exceptional purity of colour; and 'The Bride' with the largest spikes of any lilac I have seen. A spike twelve inches long of this variety is now in the Arnold Arboretum Herbarium, Boston, Massachusetts, U.S.A.

Five of the single-flowered varieties from the cross S. vulgaris x S. oblata var. dilatata have pink, mauve, or light blue flowers. 'Dr. Chadwick' was the best new hybrid that was flowering freely when Dr. L.C. Chadwick visited me and it was named for him then. The flower is pink in the bud state, opening a clear pale sky blue. 'Charles Nordine' has pale blue

flowers. The flowers of 'Churchill' are a pale pinkish mauve, becoming almost white as the flowers fade. 'Daphne Pink' and 'Excell' have pink flowers, the latter with massive panicles. 'Fraser' has large mauve flowers that are slightly reflexed at the edge.

'Laurentian' has large panicles of a deep bluish colour.

The remaining varieties from this cross have lilac or purple flowers. 'Nokomis' is lilac-coloured, 'Asessippi', 'Minnehaha', and 'Pocahontas' are purple.

The various dilatata hybrids have a very definite place in prairie horticulture. They are hardier than most of the French varieties, their compact and, in most cases, dwarf habit, combined with their fragrance and free-flowering habit, make them quite distinct. They usually flower from one to two weeks earlier than most of the common lilac varieties, and are very rarely injured by late spring frosts. On that account the variety 'Swarthmore' introduced in 1954 has never failed to flower freely every spring since its introduction.

#### *Syringa villosa* x *S. reflexa*

Five hybrids from the cross *S. villosa* x *S. reflexa* were named. The flowers are single and the flower colour ranges through rose, pink and lilac. 'Handel' has heavy close-set panicles of rosy-lilac flowers. 'Hecla' has longer and narrower drooping clusters of rose-coloured flowers than has 'Handel'. 'Helen' is a strong-growing hybrid reaching a height of about twelve feet, and as much across. The flowers are rosy-pink in colour, and as the bush matures it is covered with thousands of spikes of bloom. 'Hiawatha' has rosy pink flowers that are somewhat more impressive than those of 'Helen' on a young bush. 'Donald Wyman', produced from the second generation of this cross, has rose-coloured flowers, somewhat more impressive than those of 'Helen' on a young bush, and the colour is very stable.

### Miscellaneous Crosses

'Hedin', a hybrid from the cross S. villosa x S. sweginzowii, combines the hardiness of S. villosa with the large, loose, and graceful panicles of S. sweginzowii. The flowers and panicles are larger than those of S. sweginzowii, and the colour is white with a tinge of pink. This variety is very fragrant, and blooms until the end of June.

'Grace Mackenzie' is a hybrid between S. oblata var. dilatata and S. persica (the white "Persian Lilac"). Like other dilatata hybrids, it is compact, free-flowering, and non-suckering. The bush is of an upright habit. The panicles and flowers have the nice form of the white Persian lilac, but are much larger and very fragrant. The flower buds are lilac, varying somewhat in shade according to the season, but become white as the flowers open.

### Recent Breeding Work with Lilacs

During 1961 and 1962 I again tried to cross Syringa persica laciniata with S. vulgaris varieties and also with S. oblata var. dilatata, but without any success. I did, however, succeed in crossing my hybrid between S. microphylla and S. oblata var. dilatata securing a good set of seed. Another cross that I succeeded with was S. pubescens x S. oblata var. dilatata hybrids. In both cases I got a good set of apparently good seed, but for some unknown reason none of the seed from the cross of the S. microphylla with S. oblata var. dilatata has germinated; so I have again made this cross in 1962 and again have a good harvest of apparently good seed. The seed of the S. pubescens cross-germinated freely, and the seedlings have been transferred to the open ground. There was quite a bit of variation showing in the seedlings from this cross.

My purpose in raising hybrids of S. microphylla is to try to get varieties with clearer pink flowers on a dwarf bush; these dwarf bushes are more in keeping with present-day styles of home architecture.

The late Professor C.S. Sargent used to think S. pubescens

the most fragrant of all lilacs and I feel sure that hybrids between it and some of the S. oblata var. dilatata would make a most welcome addition to the fragrant shrubs that would be hardy in our region, besides possibly lengthening the season of the vulgaris group of lilacs.

During 1965, two new lilac hybrids (described below) were selected and named. 'Royal Purple', from a cross between Syringa vulgaris, and S. oblata var. dilatata is the darkest of all lilacs we have flowered at Dropmore. In the bud stage the double flowers are almost black, turning to royal purple as they open. 'Maiden's Blush' is the result of a cross between Syringa microphylla var. superba and a pink hybrid of Syringa oblata var. dilatata. Though S. microphylla was the seed parent, the hybrid has the leaves and large panicles of flowers and fragrance of its male parent. Only four seedlings were raised from this cross, and the one selected for naming was the shortest variety, being about five feet tall. It is also the clearest pink in colour of any lilac of this section that we have ever flowered at Dropmore.

#### Propagation of Lilacs

Named varieties of the common lilacs as imported from Europe, are usually grafted either on Privet or on seedlings of Syringa vulgaris; neither of these stocks are suited for western Canada. Privet is not hardy, and unless the lilacs grafted on it are planted deeply enough to get on their own roots the first season, they will probably kill out the first winter. Seedlings of the common lilac have the objectional feature of "suckering" and in a few years the suckers are pretty sure to smother the grafted portion of the bush.

Lilacs can be propagated by layering but this method is too slow and expensive for the nurseryman to use; and while some species of the villosa section can be grown from hardwood cuttings, this is not practical with the named hybrids of the common lilac. A.M. Brand of Minnesota used to graft lilacs on the ash but we did not get a good enough catch with this stock to make it economically sound. Dr. Carl Sax of the

Arnold Arboretum was successful in budding the varieties of the common lilac on Syringa amurensis, but though I tried Dr. Sax's method, it did not work under our climatic conditions. We also tried budding named lilacs on S. villosa stocks, but this did not work either, and for some time we found grafting lilacs on S. villosa stocks during the winter the only economically sound method of propagating lilacs in quantity. If scions about six inches long were used and the grafts were planted deeply, a large percentage became established on their own roots within three years. Lilacs on their own roots are easier to transplant than grafted plants.

Softwood cuttings were tried, but the success of this method depended on several factors: the season, the time the cuttings were taken, and the variety. Some of the named European varieties were extremely difficult to root under the best conditions; while under good conditions some of the dilatata hybrids would give a very high percentage of plants for cuttings set. Much depended, however, on the season and on the time the cuttings were made. I found that just as the flowers were fading was a good time to take cuttings, and with a 'misting' system of watering under a polyethylene frame much could be done to correct the vagaries of the weather. During the summer of 1960, we were able to root quite a number of varieties by this method.

\*Frank Leith Skinner M.B.E., LL.D. (1882-1967)

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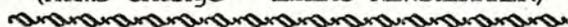
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