Lilac Newsletter

Vol. XII, No. 3, March, 1986

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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This publication, *LILAC NEWSLETTER* (formerly *THE PIPELINE)* is issued monthly. Back copies are available by writing to the International Lilac Society, c/o Mr. Charles Holetich, Royal Botanical Gardens, Box 399, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. L8N 3H8. Please send 50 cents for each copy requested.

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Do Your Clothes Smell Lilac Fresh

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Flower fragrances have been appreciated by humans from the very earliest of times. Long used in perfumes and other cosmetics by women, they are increasingly used today in men's toiletries, cleaning agents, air fresheners, and sometimes even in the mail.

Most plants with fragrant flowers have yielded their essences to the perfume chemist. Some of the most commonly used are the oils of rose, jasmine, lavender, orange blossom, heliotrope, and gardenia. But some flowers don't readily give up their essence, even though they strongly perfume our gardens. One of them is the lilac.

Several methods can be used to remove odoriferous principles from flowers, including steam distillation, extraction in cold fat (a very ancient method called enfleurage), and a more recent method using organic solvents. While some of these methods have been used to obtain a concentrated essence, called an absolute, from lilac flowers, its odor lacks all the characteristics of the fresh flower.

According to Dr. Robert J. Steltenkamp, writing in the journal Perfumer & Flavorist, only a few natural lilac products have been obtained from S. vulgaris using low temperature solvent extraction. Any use of heat destroys the scent.

Within the past decade, Japanese chemists have analyzed extracts of lilac blossoms to determine what makes up their unique fragrance. The major odorous components, constituting 70 percent of the extracted oil, are four complex alcohols known as the lilac alcohols. According to Steltenkamp, these alcohols are described as having "an exquisite floral fragrance." As many as 30 other components were identified in the lilac oil but in considerably smaller amounts.

While the four major lilac alcohols have been synthesized chemically, the procedure is complex and the starting material expensive, thus ruling out their commercial use.

Nevertheless, an imitation lilac fragrance has been available for the last 50 years, made up of a combination of seven natural and synthetic fragrances. The two major components, alpha-terpineol and hydroxycitronellal, are the most useful chemicals for imitating the real lilac fragrance even though neither is found in the lilac flower. Alpha-terpeneol is found in several flower oils, including geranium, magnolia, and gardenia but is most abundant in turpentine, from which it is prepared on a large scale. It comes closest to the true character of lilac and is especially useful when the lilac fragrance is to be used in soaps and detergents because of its stability under alkaline conditions. Hydroxycitronellal, noted for its sweet rose-like odor, is obtained from certain grasses grown in Java and the Phillipines. It is more expensive than terpineol and can't be used in cleaning agents because it is destroyed by alkali. In that case, several substitutes may be used.

To the traditional lilac base are generally added a wide variety of aromatic chemical and natural essences. In fact, says Steleenkamp, "The uniqueness in lilac composition arises in part from the use of the accessory or special effect notes." Some of the natural oils used include ylang-ylang, jasmine, rose, lemon oil, verbena oil, or whatever else the perfumer's imagination dictates.

Many companies have devised their own lilac specialties for perfumery application. Lilac by itself, however, is seldom used for personal fragrances because it is less delicate than lily of the valley and not as recognizable as rose. Oddly, the one formulation considered to be closest to the classic lilac type is named Apple Blossom and it has been used in several perfumes, including Arpege by Lanvin.

Actually, the lilac fragrance is used much more in other consumer products. It is the dominant scent in detergents such as Super Suds, Persil, and Tide; in toiletries such as Tegrin Shampoo, Barber's Shaving Soap and Pinaud Lilac Vegetal Shaving Cream; and in Wizard and Florient air fresheners.

While few consumers may be able to say with any confidence that a particular product smells exactly like lilac blossoms, the imitation lilac essence may very well be there. But it is primarily a building block upon which each company builds something distinctive for a particular product. You might rather call it a floral scent, not exactly lilac, and certainly not the real thing in your garden on a sunny spring day.

VIRUS-FREE SYRINGA ROOTSTOCK

The working group for forcing of woody plants of the NTS(Dutch horticultural study groups) in the Netherlands has secured 25,000 virus-free Syringa rootstocks raised by the NAK-B (Dutch General Inspection Service for Arboricultural Products). The rootstock is to serve in a large-scale commercial trial to demonstrate the advantages of using healthy propagules in commercial plantings. It is a well known fact that annually 5 to 7% of the balled lilac plants used for forcing have to be destroyed. This, combined with the improved growth of virus-free woody plants and the better quality of the flowers, suggests that it is good practice to switch rapidly to virus-free stock. The extension service points out that the virus-free rootstock should be planted out only on previously sterilized soil. A soil sample can be tested for the presence of virus transmitting nematodes. Of course, virus-free bud sticks provided by NAK-B must be used. Those growers who obtained virus-free material can count on the trial being monitored by the extension service. Because of the great interest shown by the growers the available material will have to be allotted.

News item from: Deutsche Baumschule, October 1985

Translated by Freek Vrugtman, RBG

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