

The Magnetism of Lilacs

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ROCHESTER, N.Y. — Highland Park, a 155-acre park located in Rochester, N.Y., is famous for its lilacs and its magnetism to lilac breeders.

The park was established in 1888 on land donated to the city by nursery pioneers George Ellwanger and Patrick Barry. Its landscape was designed by famous landscape

In 1892, the park's horticulturist, John Dunbar, started planting and breeding lilacs. His vocation resulted in the "President," "Inventor" and "Famous General" lilac series. Examples are "President Lincoln," with single Wedgewood blue flowers; "Thomas Edison," with single purple flowers; and "General Sherman," a single pink-flowered lilac.

The oldest lilac bush in the park is a double lilac, "President Grevy," planted in 1892.

Lilacs are known as plants for colder climates and grow very well in the Northeast. They all belong to the genus, *Syringa*, and Highland Park has about 15 of the 21 known species and about 600 named cultivars, according to the current horticulturist and lilac breeder, Kent Millham, who is the editor for the International Lilac Society.

"It is hard to keep track. We recently obtained another 60 cultivars from a specialty nursery ... also we have quite a large section of unnamed hybrids," Millham said.

Over the years, Highland Park has had a number of horticulturists who have named about 60 lilac cultivars. "Rochester" (*Syringa vulgaris*) was discovered in the 1950s as seedling in the Highland Nursery by then-Director of Parks Alvan R. Grant and horticulturist Richard Fenicchia.

Millham said the "Rochester" lilac is very unusual, because it has radial doubling, resulting in florets of up to 25 petals rather than the normal double with 2 sets of 4 petals, and is a good parent for hybridizing. Fenicchia used it to develop the outstanding cultivars "Sesquicentennial" and "Martha Stewart."

In France during the 1800s, Victor Lemoine and his descendants crossbred *S. vulgaris* and hybridized *S. vulgaris* with *S. oblata*, resulting in a series known as Lemoine's "French hybrids" (although not native to France). Some examples from this series are the wonderfully fragrant lilacs "Madame Lemoine" and "Miss Ellen Willmott," both of which are at Highland Park.

In breeding lilacs there are many priorities, but Millham said "the cultivar needs to be unique." With about 2,000 named cultivars this can be a challenge. Millham looks for flower size and growth habit.

In the last few years he has been successful in identifying a *S. vulgaris* selection with large florets which he named "Maggie Brooks," for the Monroe County executive. He also has a selection from *S. komarowii* subsp. *reflexa*, which is very vigorous, and has spectacular red-pink flowers — this he named "Beautiful Susan" after his late wife.

Lilacs can be found at most general nurseries and garden centers, but are usually restricted to a few lilac cultivars. For specific and more unusual cultivars, a grower must contact a specialty lilac nursery, of which there are a number in the northeastern U.S.

However, according to Millham, "At Highland Park we have some old cultivars that may not be elsewhere. It is very important that we propagate these and that we share them with other arboreta. Just the other day the plant inspector was here as we have material to send to Canada."

Millham is excited about an upcoming visit of Russian delegates, some of whom are members of the International Lilac Society. They will be gifting a number of Russian lilac cultivars to Highland Park.

Lilac Festivities

The first Lilac Sunday was held at Highland Park in 1909. Three years later nearly 25,000 people attended. By 1978, it had become a 10-day-long Lilac Festival. For 2013, the 115-year-old festival will run from May 10-19. Visitors to the Rochester Lilac Festival will have the opportunity to experience some of the early and mid-season blooming lilacs. Blooming usually lasts for about 6 weeks starting in May.

Millham said that last year was a most unusual season.

"We had lilacs in bloom in early April ... then we had a cold snap. This year looks better so far," he said.

Millham is not only responsible for the prized lilac collection at Highland Park but also for another not-to-be-missed horticulture feature: the Pansy Bed made from about 12,000 plants and designed as a floral "carpet" with a different design each year.

Festival attendees will have the opportunity to purchase lilac plants. The funds raised will go to support the future of the trees at Rochester's Monroe County Parks.

More information can be found on the International Lilac Society at the website www.internationalilacsociety.org or by contacting the International Lilac Society, Attn: Karen McCauley, 325 W. 82nd Street, Chaska, MN 55318; 952-443-37063.

Extensive information on lilacs can be found in the book, "Lilacs: A Gardener's Encyclopedia," by John L. Fiala and Freek Vrugtman, by Timber Press.