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LILAC
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LILAC, a fragrant, deciduous shrub of the genus *Syringa* of *Oleaceae*, olive family. The term is derived from Persian *lilanj*, the indigo plant (Skeat, p. 341; cp. Mid. Pers. *nīl* "indigo," *nili* "dark blue"). "Lilac" is also a substantive for a pale to light or moderate purple (*Amer. Heritage Dict*., s.v.; cf. Pers. *lāki*). The genus *Syringa* is named after *Syrinx*, a nymph of Greek legend who was transformed into a hollow reed and lived on invisibly in the shepherd reed. The name *Syringa* thus means a hollow tube and refers to the broad pith in the shoots, which is easily hollowed out to make reed flutes (Bennett, pp. 22, 57). In Persian, the lilac plant is known as *yās-e ḵuša'i* (clustered *yās*), *yās-e banafš* (purple *yās*), *yāsaman*, *yāsamin* (Ar. *yasmin*), and *yās* (Dehḵodā, s.v.; Zargari, III, p. 346; Zāhedi, p. 175). These three last names also designate the genus *Jasminum* of the same family, which is a different plant and whose use in similes and metaphors in Persian poetry do not fit the description of lilac.

The common lilac (*S. vulgaris* L.), also called pipe tree in England, is the widespread species of this genus. This shrub reaches approximately 6 m and produces many suckers and shoots from the stem or root. Leaves are 4-8 cm long, ovate; inflorescences 10-20 cm long, usually paired, without basal leaves; corolla tube 8-12 mm long, cylindrical, and often purplish; capsule 8-14 mm long, ovoid, acuminate (Tutin et al., III, p. 54; Bennett, p. 67).

The Persian lilac (*S. persica* L.) is a small shrub, about 2 m tall and slightly wide, with upright branches and relatively compact branching habit; bluish green leaves, almost lance or ovate form, about 5 × 1.5 cm, 3-9 pinnate; early-blooming tubular, usually pale purple and dark-centered flowers with a

distinctive spicy fragrance (Murray, p. 2; Bennett, p. 86). The Persian lilac has been a garden favorite in Iran for centuries and today occurs in various parts of the country (Murray, p. 2). This species is assumed to be a hybrid between *S. vulgaris* and *S. laciniata* (Bennett, p. 86).

The Afghan lilac (*S. afghanica* C. K. Schneider), endemic of Afghanistan and Pakistan, is also a deciduous small shrub, with short and diverge ramification; leaves 1-3 × 0.2-1.3 cm, entire, almost leather form, elliptical or linear lance; inflorescences 2-4 cm long, corolla tubular, 1 cm long (Murray, p. 2).

A lilac needs sunlight and benefits from cool climates; it is often planted in late winter or early spring. It needs pruning to maintain its form and abundant blooms (O'Sullivan and Bussolini, p. 346). It can be propagated by dividing suckers, layering, cutting, and grafting. While common lilac may be susceptible to frost damage, and to a few pests (scales, borers, and leaf miners) and diseases (bacterial blight and Ring spot virus), Persian lilac is considered as a trouble-free shrub (Bennett, pp. 86, 106-7). Hundreds of improved varieties, mostly French, have large single or double flowers in various intense colors and are more disease resistant than wild lilacs.

In the 19th century, many people planted a lilac, with its fragrant flower clusters in traditional lilac blue, below a window of their house so that they could breathe in the scent (O'Sullivan and Bussolini, p. 346). In Western Europe, forced lilacs are used for Christmas in the United States and Canada instead of poinsettias (Bennett, p. 42). The easiest way to force lilacs is to pick budded branches and keep them in warm places.

Lilac flowers are edible. They are picked, washed, dried, and used in salads and desserts. Most plant parts possess Syringopicrin and Syringin (Zargarī, III, p. 348). Syringin, also known as lilacin, is a glucoside found in the bark. It is extracted as a white crystalline substance, combined with malic acid (Simpson and Weiner, VIII, p. 952). In herbal medicine, extracts of bark and flowers are used for treatment of some kinds of fever, diarrhea, and rheumatism. The extracts of bark and fruits of Persian lilac have tonic, constipating, and antipyretic effects (Zargarī, III, p. 348-49). In Egypt, flowers of the double white lilac is used to help women in their labor of childbirth (Bennett, p. 25).

Young stems of Persian and common lilacs possess soft pith and can be evacuated easily to make flutes. The older stems, however, possess hard pith and may be used in inlaid work in Persian fine arts (Dehḵodā, s.v.). The lilac's

perfume is just as haunting, invisible, and airborne as Syrinx (Bennett, pp. 22, 57).

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