

3 Colorful Species of Lilacs Found on Mackinac Island



Nature Notes

By
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We're just finishing "Lilac Time on Mackinac Island," to quote the 1940s song from the film, "This Time for Keeps." This year the lilacs were in full bloom for the beginning of the celebration and we hope they will last until the end. It has been a truly spectacular display of color and scent this year.

For more than half a century, the lilacs of Mackinac have been celebrated. There are three species of Lilacs on the Island. Two that are not seen as much are the Himalayan or Late Lilac (*Syringa villosa*) and the Japanese Tree Lilac (*Syringa reticulata* or *S. amurensis* var. *japonica*). The Late Lilac has lavender-pinkish upright inflorescences, which appear a week or two after the Common Lilac and before the Japanese Tree Lilac. The Tree Lilac is a small tree with the typical heart-shaped lilac leaves and its cluster of white blossoms. These look rather like ascending plumes, 12 to 18 inches tall. The blossoms will appear in July.

The third species, the Common or French Lilac (*Syringa vulgaris*), grows exceptionally well here, and Mackinac can boast some of the largest specimens in the country. It is our most frequently found lilac species. Some of these "trees," and locally we call them trees, are three stories tall and with stem diameters of more than two feet. Mackinac seems to have almost perfect conditions for growing these plants. They like near neutral soil (pH 6-7), well-drained soil, cold winters, and lots of sun.

There are several hundred varieties of the Common Lilac, and on Mackinac we have more than 100, in part owing to the contributions by the International Lilac Society, which has donated numerous specimens. The flowers may be single or double, the leaves solid green or variegated, and the plants may be dwarf or standards. The flower colors range from white, violet, pink, blue lilac, red-purple, dark purple, and even a yellow variety known as "primrose."

Within the last 10 years, a spectacular variety of Common Lilac was developed known as "Sensation." This lilac has picotee-edged flowers, meaning the edge of the flower is white while the rest of the flower is a red-purple. As far as I know, this is the only lilac with a variegated flower.

The Sensation seems to be occasionally prone to an unusual color change in the blossoms. A friend of mine called me the other day to tell me about a lilac that he had planted about six years ago. On one branch was an inflorescence that was white right next to one which was purple. When I got to the house, on the

corner of French Lane and Market Street, I realized that the plant in question was a "Sensation." I also looked at another of the same variety, located at the *Town Crier* office, and saw a few inflorescences that had white flowers, as well as ones that were purple with white edges. While talking to Mary Slevin, from the Tourism Bureau, she mentioned that there was one similarly flowered behind the booth. This appears to be a variation, probably caused by a genetic point mutation in the flower, causing it to revert to one of its hybrid ancestors. It is an unusual effect, though apparently not too uncommon.

Near the original specimen that I looked at was another interesting plant. One lilac tree, which had some age on it, had a branch of white-flowered blossoms on a plant whose other branches had lilac-colored blossoms. I guessed immediately that the white flowering branch had been grafted on to a "lilac" lilac. Grafting is a process where a branch of one plant is attached to another. The plants may be the same species or similar species. There are several different cuts that can be used. One is an angled cut, where both a branch of the main plant and the branch to be added are sliced on a shallow angle and laid together. They can be held together by wrapping them with thread and sealing the graft with wax. Another cut is a forked cut, where both the plant and the branch to be added are cut in a "V" and then slid in to one another. They're then sealed together. After seeing the grafted lilac on French Lane, I think I might try it on one of my own lilacs.

The growth rate of the Common Lilac is rather dramatic, and so it's difficult to get much of an idea of the age of the plant from its size. The large size of some of our lilacs has given rise to the myth that Mackinac has the oldest lilac trees in the country, with trees dating back to the 1600s, with the French bringing them here. This may in part have arisen from one of the common names for this species of lilac, the French Lilac.

Lilacs originated in Eastern Europe and were cultivated in Turkey for a long while. In the 1500s they were brought to Vienna, and later Paris. In France, many hybrids were developed and eventually in the 1700s they were brought to North America. Both Thomas Jefferson and George Washington had them in their gardens. As far as Mackinac Island is concerned, the first known reference to lilacs seems to have occurred in the second half of the 19th Century.

It is interesting to note that Gurdon Hubbard's father worked on or ran Lilac farms in



Above and right: Lilac blossoms are found in many colors, including white, violet, pink, blue-violet, red-purple, dark purple, and yellow. Some blooms are variegated, as in above photo.

the eastern United States and Canada. Gurdon Hubbard is the man who converted his 80-acre tract of land, on the southwest side of Mackinac, adjacent to the West Bluff, into an early cottage development known as Hubbard's Annex. I've been told that the first cottage that he built there around 1870 was known as "The Lilacs."

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Good Times Roll in Lilac Festival Hayride

Eager Island visitors prepare to take an hour long hay ride around the Island. The hay ride is one of many evening activities scheduled during the Lilac Festival.