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Syringa vulgaris

LILAC is a deciduous shrub or tree. Native to south-eastern Europe it has fragrant lilac-coloured flowers.

It is also known as Blue ash, Blue pipe-tree, Common lilac, Common syringa, *Flieder* (German), *Gewöhnlicher Flieder* (German), *Lelog* (Welsh), *Lilas* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), Mauve lilac, May, *Orgován obyčejný* (Slovak), Pipe tree, Roman willow, Scotch lilac, *Šeřík obecný* (Czech), *Sering* (Dutch), *Sirinfo ordinara* (Esperanto), Spanish ash, *Syren* (Swedish), *Syringa*, *Vanlig syren* (Swedish), and White lilac; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of ‘do you still love me ?’ (purple), fastidiousness (purple), first love (purple), purity (white), ‘you shall be happy yet’, and youthful innocence (white).

There are white, pink and purple varieties.

Essential oil is extracted from the flowers.

Warning – if the scent is inhaled to excess it can cause nausea and depression.

Syringa vulgaris is the true ‘syringa’ not the mock orange (*Philadelphus coronarius*) as some mistakenly believed.

Vulgaris means ‘common’.

According to legend its introduction to the British Isles is owed to a falcon that dropped the seed in an old lady’s garden in Scotland. The bush grew without flowering until the day when a passing prince stopped to admire it and a purple plume from his headdress dropped into it. Thenceforth the bush bore purple flowers and the purple shrub brought such joy to a young local girl that when she died on the eve of her marriage a cutting was planted on her grave. This cutting flourished and eventually grew into a bush that bore white flowers.

A five-petalled flower is often believed to be a bad omen and it is also considered unlucky by some people to bring lilac indoors, particularly the white variety that is associated with death. This taboo could have emerged in England because in some parts of the Country it is called ‘may’ which would no doubt have led to confusion over its history. In some areas in the British Isles it is also believed unlucky to wear white lilac (other than on May Day) as this means you will never marry. On the other hand for others lilac cultivated outside the house was another matter. Planted at the diagonals of a house it was thought to be able to give protection against evil.

Lilac seems to have given inspiration to several poets including the Englishman, William Cowper (1731-1800) who wrote

The lilac, various in array, now white,
Now sanguine, and her beauteous head now set
With purple spikes pyramidal, as if
Studious of ornament, yet unresolved
Which hue she most approved, she chose them all.

– and the well-known Scotsman, Robert Burns (1759-1796) who declared

O were my Love you lilac fair,
Wi’ purple blossoms to the spring,
And I a bird to shelter there,
When wearied on my little wing;

How I wad mourn when it was torn
By autumn wild and winter rude!
But I wad sing on wanton wing
When youthfu' May its bloom renew'd.

This was another of the plants brought to western Europe in 1562 by Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, the Flemish diplomat who served as an Ambassador to the Sultan of Turkey, when he returned to Vienna. The date of its introduction to Britain is uncertain but it is mentioned in an inventory taken in Norwich by Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658), the soldier and statesman who was the self-appointed lord protector of England 100 years later.

Although no date is known for its introduction to North America lilac is believed to have reached there by at least 1650. There the Iroquois Indians included it in their medicinal store cupboard and used the bark for healing oral sores on adults and children.

New Hampshire in the United States adopted the flower as a state emblem in 1919.

Lilac essence is used in perfumery – and is often used to adulterate that of tuberose (*Agave polianthes*).

The hollow stems were once used in Turkey to make pan-pipes.

Medicinally, herbalists used to recommend the flowers and seeds for treating fevers including malaria, and in North America they also provided a remedy for worms.

White is the birthday flower for 24th July.

Purple is the birthday flower for 25th July.