

Conservation Corner

By Corinne Peterson
Pocahontas County Naturalist



March 25, 2015

*When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom 'd,
And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,
I mourn 'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.*

This spring marks the 150th anniversary of the death of President Lincoln on April 14, 1865, the first American president to be assassinated. In his memory poem, Walt Whitman places a sprig of lilac on Lincoln's coffin, forever linking the season of spring with the loss of his fallen hero. Here in Pocahontas County, early pioneer families would plant a lilac to mark the grave sites of their young children. Each spring an old lilac bush still blooms in the front yard of our century farm. Each spring I'm reminded of my dad breaking off a sprig to wear as a boutonniere in his bib overalls as he planted the fields, my mom filling a jar with lilacs for the kitchen table, my sister and I playing wedding with lilac bouquets.

Syringa vulgaris or common lilac is a member of the olive family along with olive and ash trees, jasmine, privet, forsythia, and fringtrees. This large deciduous shrub was first introduced into Europe from Ottoman gardens in the late 1500s and brought to the American colonies in the 1700s. Lilacs have since become naturalized throughout Europe and North America. Did you know the lilac is the state flower of New Hampshire? As such, it is "symbolic of that hardy character of the men and women of the Granite State."

Like New Englanders, lilacs are hardy and easy to grow. Unlike me, lilacs need a winter chill period in order to set flowers. Today lilac cultivars bloom in colors that range from white to lavender to deep purple as well as pink and blue and grow in both bush and tree form. Perhaps you've noticed that your lilacs tend to flower more profusely in alternate years. Deadheading the blossoms before they completely fade and form seedpods will provide the best blossom show each year.

This year PCCB is offering both the common purple lilac and Villosa lilac on our Spring Tree & Shrub Sale. Both have regular to medium growth. The Villosa blooms later in the season than the common purple and doesn't sucker as much but also doesn't smell as good. Its main wildlife benefit is providing nesting for songbirds. The common purple lilac, of course, is known for its heady fragrance that attracts butterflies and is an important, early nectar source for the tiger and great swallowtail.

Each spring Conservation offers a Tree & Shrub Sale for county residents. If you're thinking about some new plantings this spring, we still have some evergreens, shade trees, fruit trees, and shrubs looking for a new place to send down roots. Check out the plant list and availability on our website at www.pocahontas-county.com/conservation or give us a call at 712-335-4395.

When did the lilacs last bloom in your dooryard?

