

HEAVEN

Scent



NO FLOWER ANNOUNCES SPRING'S ARRIVAL QUITE LIKE FLUFFY, ULTRAFRAGRANT LILACS. AND HAPPILY FOR GARDENERS, THE SHRUBS ARE ONE OF THE LEAST DEMANDING PLANTS AROUND.



freshly cut

Charle-Pan Dawson, *opposite*, holds an armful of lilacs outside the studio where she makes perfume from the flowers that grow on her property. A mixed arrangement shows off the flowers' spectrum of colors. For longer-lasting flowers, Charle-Pan cuts early in the morning, snipping mature, woody branches rather than new growth. Before arranging flowers, she makes a blunt cut across the bottom of a branch and a slit that reaches an inch or so up to help it absorb water.



the art of **ENFLEURAGE**

Charle-Pan's method for extracting the scent from lilacs, a process known as enfleurage, can be done with any fragrant flower. Here's how.

1. Spread a thin layer of solid, room temperature deodorized fat such as avocado butter or coconut oil on a tray (she uses a specialty tray, but a baking pan works fine).
2. Layer flowers on the fat, then cover with plastic wrap or a second tray. Keep at room temperature so fat stays solid; replace with new flowers daily for three to four weeks.
3. After removing the final flowers, scrape off pomade and store in a jar to use as a body moisturizer or solid perfume. For more info, see cherryvalleylilacs.com.



EVERYONE IN CHERRY VALLEY knows when Charle-Pan Dawson's lilacs are in bloom: The news is literally blowing on the wind. For several weeks in May and June, this small New York town is perfumed with the scent wafting from her orchard of 150 lilac shrubs. After a long winter, the cottony clouds of blue, purple, pink, and white flowers are a welcome sight too. "It's like a spring awakening," Charle-Pan says.

When she and her husband, Dana, bought the property nine years ago, they inherited a lilac legacy. The previous owner, nurseryman George Alverson, had amassed a large collection of hardy European and Canadian lilacs. Charle-Pan, who had never grown the shrubs before, spent time walking the land with Alverson, learning about the plants and how to care for them. As she discovered, lilacs—especially well-established plants—don't



need much to thrive beyond a nice, cold winter and some summer pruning.

"George left me his knowledge, tools, notes, and records," she says. "Still, I had no idea of the collection's magnitude or splendor until my first spring on the property." As the flowers bloomed,

they sparked an idea. Trained as a chemist, Charle-Pan began experimenting with enfleurage, the extraction of essential oils from flowers. Beyond selling the essence of lilac, Cherry Valley Lilacs now hosts tours and enfleurage classes. Charle-Pan also continues the tradition of collecting shrubs. In recent years she's added compact new cultivars as well as a couple of repeat-blooming lilacs, which extend the flowering—and that unmistakable scent—all the way until the first frost.



harvest **season**

Trimming lilac branches for arrangements helps keep shrubs tidy. Charle-Pan recommends waiting several years before radical pruning: "They naturally form a beautiful shape." To revive an old lilac, remove thick, woody stems gradually over three years.

GROUND Rules



▲ Although Charle-Pan's lilacs grow in an orchard, the shrubs also work well in mixed plantings. Pair them with perennials that flower or have pretty foliage during lilacs' off-season (when not in bloom, the shrubs aren't particularly interesting).

With the right care, a lilac shrub can flower for decades. Mark Quinn, who supervises the 1,000-lilac collection at New York's Highland Park, shares his expertise on all things lilac.

CLIMATE
Hardy from Zones 3–8, lilacs are survivors in cold regions but fail to flower in warmer climates where they don't get a big chill.

LIGHT
Without sufficient light, your lilac will not reach its blooming potential. The minimum is six hours of full sun daily. More is even better.

WATER
When planting a new shrub, water if necessary to supplement rain for the first two years. Then leave the bush to its own devices, "unless there is a massive drought," Quinn says. A well-drained location is a must; standing water can spell death for a lilac.

SOIL
Lilacs prefer alkaline-to-neutral soil with a loamy consistency. An acid pH might lead to issues with nutrient absorption. But again, lilacs are adaptable. "If your soil is relatively

fertile, lilacs do not need additional fertilizer," Quinn says. Light fertilizing is recommended if your soil is poor. Generally, he layers on about half an inch of compost once every five years. "A thicker layer encourages roots to gravitate toward the surface," he warns. Surface roots might result in frequent wilting.

PRUNING
Quinn is a major proponent of pruning mature lilacs on a regular basis. He removes older, less productive branches to encourage new growth. That said,

he advises against removing more than a third of the overall plant. Timing is everything. Make cuts right after blooming in late May or early June. If lilacs are pruned later, they will forfeit flowers the following year. Beyond keeping a lilac tidy, pruning "opens up airflow into the bush," he explains. Good air circulation and using drip irrigation instead of overhead watering help prevent powdery mildew. Although powdery mildew doesn't cause permanent harm to the plant, it does look unsightly. ■

lilac varieties

Of the more than 20 species of lilacs, Cherry Valley's collection is primarily made up of the ultrafragrant and easily grown common lilac (*Syringa vulgaris*). Shrubs range in size from 3 to 15 feet tall. Some flowers have four petals (like the bicolor 'Sensation'); others (like 'Beauty of Moscow') are more dense spires of petals.

