

## *Lilac Sundays*

By Kim Smith

Recently a client inquired as to what is my favorite lilac. I could hardly give her a simple response. Perhaps more easily answered questions would be what is a choice blue lilac, or which lilacs do you recommend for an intimate garden, or for the homeowner who may be planning a larger garden—what is your favorite combination of lilacs? Lilacs (*Syringa vulgaris*) are lovely in their wild form, found growing in the Balkan Mountain regions of Romania, Yugoslavia, and Moldavia. Over the centuries, in the hands of many hybridizers, the lilacs of today are available in myriad colors and forms. However, very few match the species *Syringa vulgaris* for sweetness and density of fragrance.

When planning for lilacs, bear in mind that periodic maintenance is involved for their overall good health and for maximum blooms. Deadheading is best accomplished immediately after flowering. Prune as close to the end of the expired panicle as possible, to avoid interfering with the development of next year's flowers. Lilacs require annual shaping to create and maintain a full round-headed shrub with blossoms held at, or slightly above, eye and nose level. If allowed to grow tall and rangy, their beauty and fragrance are lost to the viewer. To find the lilac best suited for your arrangement, visit nurseries during the extended period of their florescence. Better still, to view fully the range of colors and forms in which lilacs are cultivated, come celebrate Lilac Sunday at the Arnold Arboretum in Boston.

When our daughter was very young, before her now-six-foot-tall *baby* brother was born, my husband and I would pack the picnic basket and the three of us would hop on the Mass. Ave. bus. We'd spend the afternoon meandering along the Jamaica Way, enjoying outdoor activities provided by the community—Shakespeare in the *plein air* bowl-shaped theatre, music, dance performances, and picnicking. Our most memorable outings were the annual lilac festivals at the Arnold Arboretum, which often coincided with Mother's Day (as it does today). Tucked away in the bureau drawer overflowing with unorganized family photos is a snapshot Tom took of Liv and me in polka dresses and sun hats, sharing a laugh, with clouds of lavender-blue-violet-rose lilacs billowing in the background. At a very early age, for lack of a yard, I began to take her to Isadora Duncan-inspired dance classes. The children danced to classical and romantic melodies by Bach and Grieg in a style combining early modern dance and ballet, clothed in diaphanous silk tunics, tied under the bust, empire-style, with a gold bow. As they progressed, the dancers were assigned different colored tunics. Peach silk for the very smallest, lavender for the next age group and so on. One year all the dancers in the company, from the youngest to the oldest, were invited to dance at the Arboretum on Lilac Sunday. Forever imprinted is the memory of the fragrance of the blossoms carried on the breeze intertwined with the image of the dancers frolicking beneath the trees, dressed in transparent watercolor hues of peach and Persian melon, jade green, primrose yellow, and robin's egg blue, juxtaposed against waves of lilac ribbons.

This year on May 11<sup>th</sup> from 10:00am to 4:00pm the Arnold Arboretum is celebrating the centennial anniversary of Lilac Sunday. There are over 422 lilac plants of 194 different cultivars and species represented in the Arboretum's collection. The daylong jubilee features dancing, picnicking, and self-guided tours. Visitors come from far and wide to celebrate the lilacs and the joyful arrival of spring in all its splendor, which lilacs blossoming in New England have come to symbolize. For directions and more information visit the website of the Arnold Arboretum at [www.arboretum.harvard.edu](http://www.arboretum.harvard.edu).

Readers may wish to consider becoming a member by joining the Friends of the Arnold Arboretum. Membership fees (very reasonable) help to provide support for the preservation and cultivation of the Arboretum's extensive collection. Members are offered discounts on continuing education classes taught by outstanding teachers and professionals in the field of horticulture. Studies focus on the identification of, horticultural care, and propagation of temperate woody plants. Benefits of joining also include subscriptions to the quarterly *Arnoldia* and bi-annual newsmagazine *Silva*, both publications brimming with interesting and informative articles. On Wednesday August 6<sup>th</sup> I will be giving a walk and talk at the Arboretum on the Butterflies of Summertime and another the 13<sup>th</sup> of September on the migratory species traveling through New England. Sign-up and save the dates. I hope you can come join me.

The photo is of a Red Admiral butterfly and *S. vulgaris* 'Krasavitsa Moskvyy' taken in our garden in mid-May of last year, a banner year for Red Admirals. To answer my friend's question, 'Beauty of Moscow' is only one of my favorite lilacs. I usually don't care much for double blooms as quite often the fragrance is forsaken by hybridizers in double-flowered cultivars. Not so with 'Beauty of Moscow.' The pearly lavender-pink buds open to white florets held in lavish rounded panicles supported by strong stems. This shrub grows tall, with sturdy, robust trunks, and is one of the first to bloom, with a long florescence, continuing several weeks in all. *Lilacs ~ The Genus Syringa* by John L. Fiala is a most useful reference book on lilacs (including more than a hundred color plates), and was recently reprinted by, and is available through, Timber Press.

For local readers, please find attached the *Earth Day Celebration at Loop Pond* flyer. I hope you can come and discover all the good work Eric Hutchins and friends have accomplished to restore Loop Pond to a sustainable native grassland and woodland. Toad Hall Bookstore has donated disease resistant American chestnuts and American elm trees. Everyone is invited to join in planting, seeding and pruning on Saturday April 19<sup>th</sup> from 8am to 11pm at Loop Pond Conservation Area in Rockport. For more information, please contact Eric at 978.546.6425.

End Notes: Read more about the history of lilacs in New England, colors and combinations of, and culture on lilacs in Kim's forthcoming book *Oh Garden of Fresh Possibilities! ~ Notes from a Gloucester Garden*, June 2008. Pre-orders are available through her website at [www.kimsmithdesigns.com](http://www.kimsmithdesigns.com) and Toad Hall Bookstore at [www.toadhallbooks.org](http://www.toadhallbooks.org). Kim will be happy to respond to readers' questions and comments at [kimsmithdesigns@hotmail.com](mailto:kimsmithdesigns@hotmail.com).



*Syringa vulgaris* 'Beauty of Moscow' and Red Admiral