

Syringa: A Challenge!

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It's called enthusiasm. You must have it to go into the nursery business, or you have to be a little crazy. A combination of both works well. We all have our favorites and thank God we all do not agree. One of mine is lilacs, or as they're better known in this group — *Syringa*. Now if you were my mother, you'd know very well that a *Syringa* was a mockorange, because her mother told her so! How could it be a lilac? Now I'm no botanist, but I do know a *Syringa* when I see one.

So you want to propagate Lilacs? Actually there's nothing to it. All you have to do is propagate your selection asexually so it reproduces true to color, size, and vigor. Plant it, prune it, fertilize it, weed it, water it, etc. for several years. Now this all happens while you grow plants that really make you money like red-leaved barberries and pussy willows. So after you've struggled for several years with a group of plants that really interest you, they bloom. Now you've either struggled right from the initial propagation or you've paid out good money for your favorite color and WOW! What do you get sometimes—a dog! Its bloom is no more purple than the side of your house. Flowers are single when they should be double, the growth rate does not compare with the selected cultivar, etc. This quick description certainly does not happen in all cases, but in all too many cases it does. Years and years of effort to produce the chosen cultivar results in frustration and disappointment.

History — In the I.P.P.S. Today, there are many, many members younger than I am. I would like to talk briefly about the time in this organization when there were many, many members older than I am. My introduction into plant propagation was in the era of closed cases, glass sash, and shading cloths. Lilac production from softwood cuttings was very erratic and uneconomical. With the advent of polyethylene plastic results improved. This increase in percentages was also aided by an increase in the range of root-inducing hormones available. "Plastic tent" propagation was quickly followed by the advent of continuous mist propagation (Jim Wells, Koster Nursery). This in turn, was quickly followed by intermittent mist (Harvey Templeton, Phytotector). These practices have continued up to today's current production by tissue culture.

Millions of softwood cuttings have been propagated successfully by these various methods. There is, however, one very important fault that has continued through all the years and all the propagation methods — "Un-true Plants"!

Keeping Cultivars True to Name. I am not up here to find fault or criticize anyone, or any company. I am here to discuss the challenge lilacs present. We all need to be positive of our propagating material no matter how the cultivar is to be reproduced. While it's usually not possible to propagate from the original selection it is in many cases possible to propagate from older established plants of the selected cultivar. Even so, we cannot all do this. So, we rely on our proven suppliers. And following all this we keep meticulous records!

During my plant propagation tenure I have been lucky enough to have been given some managerial responsibilities. Now we all know the fringe benefits that come

with this kind of a job. For instance:

- Being on call 24 h a day. This entitles you to the company's problems, as well as your employees problems.
- You get to deal happily when the sheriff comes to serve a summons at lunch time. "Hah! Got ya!"
- You deal with irate wives or girlfriends over who is going to get his pay check.
- And then there are always the "Byfielders". A local source of labor. Every company has its Byfielders. They are the back bone of the digging crews. They may not all chew, but they sure can dig.

I would like to relate a true occasion regarding Byfielders and lilacs. I was not present, but one of our planting crews was made up of four men. Snipe, Boob, Mink, and Nucky. A stalwart bunch to say the least. They were sent out to plant a large number of lilacs. The lilacs were properly planted and to make the job look better all of the labels were removed. The boss was angry, the owner furious, and the reply from the Byfielders was: "What difference do it be?" "They all be lay-locks!"

It makes no difference how we all propagate the genus *Syringa*. The challenge is to eliminate the question: "What difference do it be?" "They all be lay-locks!"