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Lilacs return to Onondaga Park

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By Linda Bien Home & Garden editor

One of Syracuse's best views is gaining another feature: the city's largest collection of lilacs.

The site is on top of a hillside in Onondaga Park, overlooking Onondaga Avenue and the city greenhouse. From there, you can see downtown, the Carrier Dome and the city's Valley neighborhood.

Last week, the first of 120 lilacs were planted along stone dust paths that run up and down the hillside. Within the next week or so, when the planting is completed, there will be about 45 different varieties.

Most of the new lilacs are 3 to 4 feet tall. Within a decade, they should reach maturity, topping out at an average of 10 to 15 feet. Kurt Watson, owner of Watson Farms in LaFayette, the landscaping contractor for the project, says many should flower this spring, with bloom times staggered by variety, from early May to mid-June.

"They're all different colors, all different sizes and different times of bloom," Watson says.

While much smaller than the collection found in Rochester's Highland Park, which has more than 1,200 bushes, Syracuse's new grove is another significant step in the effort to build a botanical garden and arboretum that straddles the city's Strathmore and South Side neighborhoods.

More than two years ago, members of the Onondaga Park Association proposed building a botanical garden as a regional attraction. Since then, a number of other organizations, including the city's parks department and the State University College of Environmental Science and Forestry at Syracuse, have become part of the effort, too.

The scope of the project has grown, too, to include both upper and lower Onondaga Park. In the lower park, the city's greenhouse, formal gardens and improvements to South Avenue are part of the plan. A pedestrian walkway would connect the lower park to Elmwood Park, where plans call for an urban nature center. Another pedestrian link would run back to Hiawatha Lake in Onondaga Park.

Some renovations began this summer. In Onondaga Park, the stone wall surrounding Hiawatha Lake was rebuilt, and the lagoon and lily pond near the stone bridge were refurbished. Work also continues on restoring the stone fountain in lower Onondaga Park along South Avenue.

Renovations are also in the planning stages at the former Elmwood Fire Station No. 3, which is

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located in the upper park. Most of the initial work involves cleaning the site, replacing windows and partitioning the space for classrooms and storage space. By spring, the building may be ready for SUNY-ESF students and community groups to use.

Funding for these projects came from a variety of sources, says David Harding, an OPA member and local landscape architect who is working with Marshall. Tyler. Rausch, a nationally known botanical garden design firm in Pittsburgh, which is developing a master plan for the arboretum and botanical garden.

The lilac restoration, which cost about \$150,000, and the fountain restoration, estimated at \$100,000, was funded with state money secured by state Sen. John DeFrancisco, R-Syracuse. The renovation of the old fire barn, which is estimated to cost \$160,000, is from a \$450,000 federal grant secured by Rep. James Walsh, R-Onondaga. An additional \$50,000 for paving improvements was secured by Assemblyman William Magnarelli, D-Syracuse.

Harding says the new lilac grove is actually a re-creation of what was in the same spot until about the mid-1980s. The original grove was planted around 1910 to 1920, on a site where, in 1779, a battle was fought between Onondagas and a Continental Army unit. In the mid-1960s, another fight was waged over the same spot, which was a proposed site for Southwest Junior High School. Eventually, the school was built on South Geddes Street in 1968, and became known as Shea Middle School.

Over the years, the size of the grove had dwindled as had the city's resources for maintaining it.

"When I moved in the neighborhood about 13 years ago, there were still 12 to 15 good-size lilacs, but by then, it was a losing battle," Harding says.

Two of those original lilacs are part of the new grove, as are some towering hemlock and blue spruce trees, which survived the Labor Day storm of 1998.

Harding says many of the new lilacs are planted in approximately the same areas as the original ones. Those locations were determined, he says, by noting where stray or "volunteer" tree species had sprouted up in circular patterns. The original lilacs were in the centers of those circles, which were approximately 12 feet in diameter.

Also in their original locations are the stone dust paths that crisscross the hillside. Harding says the paths were located following the stone gutters that had lined the original paths. Those gutters were discovered this summer when the hillside was excavated in preparation for the lilacs.

/fb1/1Lilac facts Here are some facts about lilacs from Carol Bradford, The Post-Standard's garden columnist: The common lilac is *Syringa vulgaris*. It blooms in May with flowers that, depending on the variety, can be various shades of purple, as well as white, pink or blueish. Common lilac blooms on old wood, which means it starts making the flowers for next spring soon after it finishes blooming. Whatever pruning is needed is done right after bloom, in late May, so that next year's flowers won't be cut off in the process. Common lilacs need room to grow. A spot around 6 feet square, with six hours a day of full sun, is about right. The shrubs can grow 15 feet tall, but regular removal of the largest stems will keep the height down.

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