

CENTURY FLOWER

100 YEARS OF LILAC SUNDAY

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This year marks the 100th anniversary of Lilac Sunday. It is, some Bostonians say, a springtime tradition on a par with opening day at Fenway Park. We owe that first Sunday celebration, as well as its signature name, to the press, for it was the *Boston Daily Globe* that published the banner headline “Lilac Sunday at Arnold Arboretum” on May 25, 1908. In fact, the term “Lilac Sunday” would not appear in any Arboretum publication until E. H. Wilson’s *America’s Greatest Garden* in 1925.



Arnold Arboretum Archives

Lilacs along Bussey Hill Road, May 1908

The Globe probably received one of the monthly “clipping sheets” that Charles Sprague Sargent, the Arboretum’s first director, sent to the local and national press. Consisting of four or five short articles about which Arboretum plants would be in bloom in the upcoming weeks, these sheets were quoted extensively by many newspapers, or simply reproduced in their entirety. *The Globe*, knowing that most people at that time worked six days a week, simply chose the optimum day for all to visit and thereby created “Lilac Sunday.”

Initially, Sargent would only publish an estimate of the best time to visit. In the May 1911 issue of the Arboretum’s *Bulletin of Popular Information* he wrote that “the lilacs should be at their best by the end of the week.” But with *The Christian Science Monitor* reporting that the “Lilacs Have

Burst Into Bloom at the Arnold Arboretum” (May 25, 1912) and *The Globe* continuing its coverage with “Great Display of Lilacs: Thousands of Persons Visit Arnold Arboretum and See Great Masses of Flowers” (May 25, 1914), Sargent, ever mindful of the power of the press, became more specific with his annual *Bulletin* predictions. In 1919, he forecast that “the collection will probably be at its best about May 24th.” The following year, he saw “every reason to believe that many of the plants will be in full bloom by Saturday, the 29th.” While they may have been at their peak on Saturday, *The Globe* ran coverage of the event under the heading “Lilac Sunday at the Arnold Arboretum” (May 31, 1920).

Without ever actually using the term “Lilac Sunday,” Sargent made his last lilac prediction in 1926: “When this *Bulletin* [May 19] reaches its readers the earliest Lilacs will probably be in bloom and there is every promise that Lilacs this year will be unusually full of flowers.” That year the press was exuberant: *Boston Herald* (May 28) “Announces Lilac Sunday;” *Boston Post* (May 29) “It’s Lilac Time;” *Boston Herald* (May 29) “Arboretum Lilacs Drawing Throngs.”

Nonetheless, the invitation to this Sunday celebration was not extended the following year. Early in the spring of 1927 the lilacs were cut to the ground, a drastic practice, according to Wilson, to be undertaken only if the “plants have become thin and scrawny.” On April 5, 1927, *The Boston Evening Transcript* announced “No Lilac Sunday Till 1928—Bushes at the Arnold Arboretum Are Being Given a Rest This Year, but Will Be Better Than Ever Next Spring.”

Today the date for Lilac Sunday is set almost a year in advance and the time of peak bloom is occurring earlier in the spring. Initially Lilac Sunday was apt to fall at the end of May, then for many years the third Sunday in May was the norm; but recently the celebration has been moved to the second Sunday in May. In addition to the beautiful and fragrant display, visitors at the Centennial Lilac Sunday this year can enjoy picnicking (on this special day only), guided and self-guided tours, a lilac-themed art exhibition, dance and musical performances, and special family activities. With a lilac collection composed of some 400 plants, each with its own predilections for blooming time, true aficionados should visit more than once. 🌸