

OSU seeks to breed better lilacs

By **DESIREE BERGSTROM**
Capital Press

CORVALLIS, Ore. — The Ornamental Plant Breeding Program at Oregon State University is attempting to create a better re-blooming lilac and make it more blight resistant.

"We want a really good re-bloomer," said Ryan Contreras, an associate professor of ornamental plant breeding at OSU.

"(Lilacs) bloom in early spring, and they bloom again in summer," Contreras said. However, not all varieties re-bloom, and the idea is to create a variety that consistently re-blooms.

To achieve that goal, Contreras said researchers have gene-sequenced the plants and rated them based on how many flowers appear on each shrub when they re-bloom.



Desiree Bergstrom/Capital Press

Ryan Contreras is in charge of the ornamental plant breeding program at Oregon State University.

"We crossed a plant that does not re-bloom with a plant that re-blooms and we

got this population. Some of those plants re-bloom, some of them do not. We sequenced



Desiree Bergstrom/Capital Press
Crossed lilac, with blooms on it, at OSU's Ornamental Plant Breeding Field Day on the Lewis-Brown Horticulture Research Farm in Corvallis, Ore.

that whole population," Contreras said.

"You have all of these, what you call markers, they are spots in the DNA" that al-

low researchers to track specific traits, he said.

They then "take the data from which plants re-bloomed and compare the phenotype—what the plants look like—to the genotype—the sequence data," he said. "That will allow us to find markers in the genome associated with the trait (of re-blooming)."

The project takes a significant amount of time.

"In lilacs we probably look at them for at least 2 years after flowering before we make a selection," he said. We identify 'OK I like that plant' and then we make cuttings of it."

Then they grow plants from the cuttings.

"We evaluate those for several years," Contreras said. "Then, assuming that there is interest and a market for them... we will release them (to the market)."

The full observation time of the new plants takes about five years after flowering starts, he said. Some plants will take several years to start flowering. From seed to release can take nearly a decade.

Another goal for researchers is to create a more blight-resistant plant. He said in the region a blight called *Pseudomonas* is common.

The blight causes brown spots on leaves and young shoots that can then grow and turn black.

The fragrance of lilacs makes them especially appealing to try to improve.

"Fragrant plants are always attractive; they never go out of style," Contreras said.

"It's a plant that has name recognition," Contreras said, as a part of the reason the program is looking to improve lilacs.



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