

Gardenias Provide Beauty and Fragrance



Photo, credit as “special to the Democrat”: *Gardenia* flowers bring a permeating fragrance to the garden and to the home.

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From colonial times gardenias have been the queens of southern gardens. In recent years, their attraction to whiteflies and aphids and the black sooty mold they leave behind seems to have banished gardenias from the more care-free landscapes. What a loss!

From Asia , to Australia to South Carolina to Florida --wherever subtropical winds blow-- the shrub with glossy green leaves and waxy-white fragrant flowers remains a favorite of many. Gardenia lovers think it is a small tradeoff to spray the unwelcome bugs with horticultural oil or insecticidal soap once or twice a year and enjoy the permeating fragrance of its flowers from May to fall and the beauty of its foliage year round.

Gardenia jasminoides is said to have been named after Dr. Alexander Garden, who planted one at his Charleston , South Carolina , home in colonial days. Brought to England in the 18th century from Eastern Asia , the shrub was carried to the Cape of Good Hope where it was called Cape Jasmine before finding its way to the Colonies.

The University of Florida IFAS Extension Service reports there are more than 200 species of gardenias. *Gardenia jasminoides* is best suited for growing in Florida and numerous cultivars have mutated from it. One local nursery offers a half dozen varieties with differing blossom and leaf sizes, plant height and spread.

Well suited to the heat and high humidity of North Florida , gardenias prefer acidic, moist, well-drained soils and do well in full sun to part shade. When plenty of organic matter , such as compost or ground bark, is used to mulch the plant, little fertilizer is needed. If gardenias need a boost to encourage growth and flower production, feed in mid-March and again in late June. Do not fertilize in the fall because the resulting tender new growth may be killed by freezing temperatures. The same acidic fertilizer specified for camellias and azaleas can be used on gardenias.

Sometimes in spring, leaves may turn yellow and fall off. If the veins of the leaves are still green, this

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indicates a deficiency of iron. The fertilizer mentioned above may add these micronutrients or an application of chelated iron, available at most full-service garden centers, may be added according to directions on the packages.

If sooty mold discolors the leaves in summer, the culprit is usually whiteflies. Shake the branches and you will see swarms of them rising up like bits of cotton at certain times. They excrete a liquid called honeydew, which supports the growth of a black fungus. Spraying with horticultural oil not only kills the insects but helps clean the leaves during the next rain. This environmental safe spray may have to be used two or more times to get rid of the insects. And it is imperative that the spray cover the undersides of the leaves.

When my family moved to Gardenia Drive more than 40 years ago, we were given several gardenia bushes for our new landscape. They were *Gardenia jasminoides*, fine specimen plants growing four to eight feet tall and covered with large white blossoms each May and June. Low branches formed roots on the ground, and when detached from the mother plant provided additional bushes for our yard and gifts for others.

The cultivar name was never known but it was likely 'Mystery,' still the best known selection. Plant nurseries now offer many other cultivars, some three feet tall, some four, some blooming in early summer, others in August.

A dwarf variety with spreading branches from one to two feet high proved to be a real delight when it was added to our garden a little later. This cultivar is 'Radicans'. It has small narrow leaves, a mounding habit and one-inch diameter fragrant flowers that appear throughout the summer. Pests do not seem to bother it much and its graceful evergreen branches make a wonderful groundcover. Other dwarf varieties have been spotted at local nurseries. One of these is 'Veitchii' which blooms from spring to fall and grows from two to four feet tall. Seemingly there is a gardenia for every purpose in the garden, some blooming in early April and others as late as August and September.

Southern gardeners are fortunate to be able to plant gardenias in the open. In the north, gardenia lovers raise them as potted plants inside, coaxing them to bloom in the dry heat of their homes. There they are imported for wedding flowers and corsages.

Here, we can cut an armload of blossoms, put them in a bowl and let them permeate the house with beauty and fragrance. That's a nice reward from the heat and humidity we share with gardenias each summer.

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