

The Gardenia is Nature's Perfume for the Garden



Photo to be submitted separately by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension

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Ah, the unmistakable fragrance of gardenias. Walking through a landscape accented with gardenias is like walking through the perfume section of a major department store. They are one of the most delightfully scented flowers we can grow in our landscapes.

Gardenias are a favorite flowering shrub in Gulf coast landscapes. They are popular for several reasons. They have shiny, dark green leaves. The evergreen shrub, oval-rounded in outline, is elegant. They prefer acid soil, which makes up most home landscape sites in the area and, of course, the flowers are beautiful and heavily scented.

To ensure that your gardenia will continue to produce year after year, it's important to plant it in a proper location and care for it appropriately. While it is a beautiful addition to the landscape, it is not without its problems.

There are over 200 species of gardenias. In Florida , varieties of *Gardenia jasminoides* are used almost exclusively. However many cultivars of *G. jasminoides* are available and there is considerable variation in flower size and form.

Choose varieties, or cultivars, that will remain in scale with the area being landscaped. While pruning helps to keep plants shapely, it's best not to have to drastically prune to control size. The more dwarf forms are often better used where space is limited, and the large bush forming varieties are fine for larger areas. For more information on the different cultivars, refer to the UF/IFAS publication on gardenias available online at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/MG336>

When pruning is needed, it should be done just after the plant finishes blooming. In our area, that means that

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any major pruning of gardenias should be done during June and July. If heavily pruned at other times of the year, there is a risk of removing, or preventing the formation of the next season's flower buds.

Gardenias grow in a variety of soil conditions but do best in well drained soil that is high in organic matter. The soil pH is important because it affects the uptake of mineral elements. These shrubs are "acid lovers," preferring a pH between 5.0 and 6.5. Therefore, they may not perform as expected planted when next to a concrete sidewalk or foundation of a house. If you suspect a soil pH problem, have the soil tested.

Proper fertilization is important for growth and flower production. Most established gardenias grow well with two or three applications per year. In north Florida, one application is normally scheduled around March and another in September. A third application may be made during the summer. An acidifying fertilizer, such as an azalea-camellia special, may be helpful since these shrubs prefer a lower pH.

The leaves of gardenias sometimes become chlorotic, or yellow. This is due to a deficiency of one or more of the micronutrients, usually iron. This can often be corrected by acidifying the soil or by a foliar application of the deficient nutrient. In most cases, a foliar application of iron will correct the problem.

Whiteflies are probably the most troublesome insect pest on gardenias in Gulf coast gardens. As the name implies, whiteflies are small, fly-like insects with white wings. They hide on the underside of leaves, where they multiply rapidly. The immature stages (nymphs) which are found on the underside of leaves are flat, oval in outline, and slightly smaller than a pin head. They are light green to whitish and somewhat transparent.

Whiteflies feed on plant juices and, in large numbers, can consume a considerable amount of nutrients. Like aphids, they excrete lots of honeydew, on which black sooty mold fungus grows. Horticultural soap or oil sprays, available at garden centers, are effective for homeowners to use against whiteflies and are safe to people and the environment. Follow label directions. Thorough coverage of the undersides of the leaves to the point of run-off is especially important when using soap or oil sprays.

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