

Gardenias have one of the headiest aromas of any plant I know, right up there with the beloved lilac. The beautiful white flowers appear from March to mid-June, depending on the cultivar. Different cultivars of this glossy evergreen shrub will grow anywhere from 2 to 15 feet tall. Use it as a ground cover, hedge, or specimen.

It's hard to resist planting one of these beauties in your home landscape when you live in Florida. They're hard to overlook when shopping, especially when they're flowering. Just try to walk past a gardenia in full bloom! But remember, it's only the 'Right Plant' if you have the 'Right Place' for it.

Start with your soil analysis. Gardenias will grow in many soils, but they do best in well drained soil enriched with extra organic matter. The pH should register between 5.0 and 6.5 for healthy gardenias. In soils with a pH above 7.0, micronutrient deficiencies become an ongoing problem. If your soil is naturally too alkaline because of limestone or seashell deposits, it is better to choose another type of plant that tolerates alkaline soil.

For best flower production, plant gardenias in 4 or more hours of sunlight. Too much shade will reduce the amount of flowers, so make a careful evaluation before you plant. The fragrance is one of the primary reasons for choosing this plant, so make sure it is planted where you can enjoy it. Plant it so a breeze can carry that fragrance to you as you lounge on the deck, patio, or by a window. My favorite way to grow a fragrant plant is in a container so I can set it right beside my chair.

Florida-friendly pruning and fertilizing can be done on a set schedule. Use a granular fertilizer for 'acid-loving' plants. Look for a product with 30 to 50% of the nitrogen in a slow-release form. In North Florida, established gardenias can be fertilized in March and September. A third application may be made during the summer. Pruning should be done just after the plant finishes blooming in early summer. If water stress occurs when the plant is in full bud, many buds will fall before opening. A layer of mulch will help maintain consistent soil moisture.

We are attracted to gardenias and, unfortunately, so are some troublesome pests. Mealybugs, aphids, scales and whiteflies are all fond of gardenias. You can control these pests by using environmentally friendly horticultural oil or insecticidal soap according to the label directions. Sooty mold often develops on leaves because of the droppings from these insects. When the insects are controlled, the sooty mold will wear away.

We enjoy the wide variety of native and exotic ornamentals that can be grown and enjoyed in Florida. If you would like to learn more about Florida's natural habitats and many ecosystems, enroll in the Florida Master Naturalist Program. Visit <http://solutionsforyourlife.ufl.edu> for more information