

Friday's Feature**By****Theresa Friday**

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Prune gardenias after they bloom for fragrant flowers every year

Gardenias are popular flowering shrubs. Their very fragrant creamy-white flowers and glossy, dark-green leaves make them a favorite in Gulf Coast landscapes.

Gardenias can be used as screens, hedges, borders or ground covers. They also may be used as free-standing specimens or in mass plantings.

These shrubs are excellent choices for fragrant flowers and handsome foliage. If you want to enjoy the flowers' fragrance, plant in areas with good air circulation near patios or windows where the fragrance will be noticed.

Plant gardenias in full sun, partial shade, or shifting shade for best flower production. However, prolonged shade may reduce flowering.

Gardenias grow in a variety of soil conditions in Florida but they do best in well-drained soil high in organic matter. Soil pH is important because it affects availability of mineral elements and should be maintained between 5.0 and 6.5 for most Florida soils.

Gardenias require more iron than other plants. In high pH or alkaline soils, iron is less available to the plant. The result can be yellowed leaves and fallen flower buds. The yellow (chlorotic) leaves due to a deficiency can often be corrected by acidifying the soil or by applying an application of iron.

Often soils near foundations or cement sidewalks will have a high pH. Also some soils will be naturally alkaline due to limestone or sea shells. Since there is no practical way to permanently lower the pH of such soils, growing a more tolerant species than gardenia may be wise.

If you suspect a soil pH problem, have the soil tested before applying any material. Your County Extension Office has information on how to take a soil sample and have it analyzed. It is very important to take the soil sample properly so your results will be

correct.

Proper fertilization is important for gardenia growth and flower production. Most established gardenias grow well with two or three applications per year. One application is normally scheduled around March in north Florida and another in September. A third application may be made during the summer.

Pruning keeps plants shapely and in scale with the landscape. Pruning should be done just after the plant finishes blooming.

In our area, that means that any major pruning of gardenias should be done in June and July. If heavily pruned at other times of the year, there is a great risk of removing, or preventing the formation of next year's flowers.

Pruning should be early enough to allow new growth to be at least four to six inches long by approximately October 1. Young plants, growing vigorously during their first year, may be pinched once in June and again in August to encourage heavy branching.

Many insect pests attack gardenias in Florida and can be troublesome unless proper control methods are used. The most injurious insects include scales, aphids, spider mites, thrips and whiteflies.

Scale insects include cottony cushion, Florida wax, soft brown scale and others. These insects attach themselves to host plants after hatching and give stems or leaves a lumpy appearance. Scale insects are more difficult to control as they mature.

Spider mites can cause considerable damage especially during hot, dry periods. These small pests feed primarily on the underside of the foliage, causing colorless or whitish spots. Therefore, considerable injury usually has occurred when the homeowner notices the damage.

Perhaps the most common pest is the whitefly. Be alert for presence of honeydew or sooty mold. Check for clouds of small white fly-like adults that fly out when foliage is disturbed or scale-like immatures on undersides of leaves.

Use of insecticidal soaps or horticultural oils can usually keep these pests in check when used properly. If problems persist, check with your local Cooperative Extension Office

for the most recent recommendations on insect control.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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