



Growing Gardenias in the Northwest

Gardenias are one of the most sought after fragrant plants there are. They are also one of the most difficult to grow, especially in a container in a climate such as ours. Here we will talk about different methods of keeping them, and some of the problems that gardeners have with them.

Hardy Gardenias: One of the first things to understand is the concept that some gardenias are considered hardy and others are not. This separation is partly cold-tolerance of individual cultivars, and partly marketing. Some cultivars handle a hard freeze slightly better than others, but the difference of tolerance for most of them is usually only a few degrees F. Furthermore, soil conditions can be at least as important as cold tolerance. Heavy soils with poor drainage and/or with not enough oxygen can ruin any gardenia. Basically put, Portland Nursery sells the cultivars 'Kleim's Hardy', 'Frost-Proof', and 'Chuck Hayes' as hardy gardenias, and most or all of the others as not. The three mentioned are indeed some of the best for cold tolerance, but that doesn't mean the others can't handle some cold. The purpose of the distinction is that if you plan to put a gardenia in the ground as part of a permanent landscape, then one of these is probably the best choice. It appears that the most cold tolerant of all of them is the 'Kleim's Hardy' gardenia.

For gardenias in the ground, the basic care instructions are part to full sun, water only when necessary, plant with excellent drainage, and fertilize in the growing season with an acidic plant food. Watch for pests, as they have their share of enemies. These will be covered more thoroughly later.

For hardy gardenias in pots, they should be treated like any other gardenia, as described below.

Gardenias in containers: Other gardenia cultivars available include some very interesting and valuable cultivars, including 'Veitchii' (everblooming), 'August Beauty' (grows tidily upright), and 'Mystery' (huge flowers). These can live for many years in the Pacific Northwest with proper care.

To grow gardenias well in containers, use a quality potting soil and a container with drainage holes, and pick the container size based on the current and future size of the plant. Do not put a little shrub in a big pot, as it will stay too wet. Change the size of the pot periodically to coincide well with the size of the shrub. Watering should always be done moderately. This means that you never let a gardenia sit fully dry or wilt, nor do you water unless the soil is getting to be partly dry, and dry at the surface. Poor watering is the most common way to end up with a poorly grown or dead plant.

Gardenias should be grown in part to full sun during the growing season for best results. For this reason, they do not grow their best nor bloom reliably in a typical living room environment. They grow best outside for the majority of the growing season, or in a greenhouse or sun room year-round. Most gardenias flower in spring to summer, though some can re-bloom during other seasons. Pruning should therefore be done after flowering, but only if it is necessary to maintain a manageable size or a pleasing shape to the plant. Do not prune without a reason. Feeding can be done with an acidic, water soluble fertilizer during the growing season.

Winter care: Aside from good watering habits, the only tricky thing about growing gardenias can be what to do with them in the winter. A greenhouse environment is ideal, but many of us do not have access to this. Aside from this, they can be grown in a cool environment with plenty of light or sun. A covered porch is often a good place for them. Almost all types can take occasional, mild, and temporary freezes. This means temperatures at 28 to 32 degrees F. If prolonged or heavy freezes should occur, the plants should be protected. This may mean moving them temporarily to the garage, basement, or very cool room in the house. The plant should be replaced to the normal conditions once temperatures have moderated. If the plants are outside in the winter, a covered area is best. Constant rainfall can keep the soil too moist in some cases.

Note that the above approach, which requires constant attention to weather extremes, is not right for everyone, and some prefer to simply bring the plant in the house for the winter. During a winter where there is only one serious freezing spell, it may work well. If, however, the weather is much more chaotic than that, the above method may be hard on the plant and especially the gardener.

If you choose to overwinter your plant indoors, choose your brightest, coolest spot. The shrub might thin out significantly depending on the amount of light it receives. The water needs can change greatly depending on the temperature and number of leaves on the plant, but the bottom line is still the same; partly dry but never fully dry. Unless you are in a greenhouse or similar environment, the plant will never stay as full of leaves as it could otherwise. The advantage of indoor growing is that you don't have to watch the weather for heavy freezes and the like. Do not expect flowers while your gardenias are in a typical indoor location.

Pests: Gardenias are unfortunately susceptible to many different insect or mite pests. Aphids, scale, mealybug, and spidermites are all common problems. Regular inspections and, when necessary, regular use of topical and/or systemic insecticides can help to control these problems. Be especially conscious of bringing problems inside with the plant to spread to other houseplants.