

Gardenia—High Maintenance Shrub

By Susan Camp

Two weeks ago, I wrote about garden problems brought on by too-early spring temperatures. Now we are facing the opposite issue—late winter weather, with temperatures dipping into the 20's at night with little daytime warm-up. We can do nothing, except try to protect our precious plants from frost and high winds.

Many garden shrubs and perennials will withstand the current temperature extremes until spring truly arrives, but I worry about the two gardenias. The smaller shrub was given to me as a cutting several years ago by fellow Master Gardener Nancy Choquette. It froze to the ground during its first two winters, but returned each spring. Our other gardenia, a hardy 'Chuck Hayes', has been in the ground for two years. I am not concerned with yellowing leaves, which is a normal occurrence before new leaves sprout, but with some brown, burnt-looking leaf margins, probably caused by the erratic weather.

If you plant a gardenia, expect to spend a lot of time pampering it. Gardenia is not an easy shrub to grow, but the rewards are great. Gardenia (*Gardenia jasminoides* or *G. augusta*), also called cape jasmine, is native to southern Asia, and other tropical and subtropical regions. It has remained a staple in southeastern gardens for generations.

An evergreen perennial shrub with glossy, leathery, dark green leaves and exquisitely-scented white flowers in spring and summer, gardenia should be planted in a location near a deck, patio, or window, where its sensuous beauty can be appreciated. Depending on the variety or cultivar, gardenia can reach a height of two to six feet, with a spread of similar size. The shrub requires light shade offering protection from hot afternoon sun and moist, well-drained, acidic soil with a pH of 5.0 to 6.0 and plenty of organic matter. If the soil is too alkaline, the gardenia may develop iron chlorosis, characterized by yellowing leaves. Iron deficiency prevents photosynthesis, so soil pH must be adjusted to allow uptake of iron by the shrub.

Plant your gardenia in early spring, in a hole as deep as the root ball, free of tree roots, and away from a concrete driveway or walk, which could increase soil pH. Gardenia should be planted high in the ground and mulched instead of cultivated, to avoid disturbing delicate roots.

Gardenia requires one inch of water per week. Drip irrigation is preferred to prevent brown spots from forming on blossoms and leaves.

Fertilize gardenia in mid-March and again in June with acid-loving plant food, blood meal, or fish emulsion. Do not fertilize in the fall. Prune in early spring and remove spent flowers and straggly branches, as needed.

Gardenia is prone to infestation by aphids, thrips, whiteflies, mealybugs, and scale insects, all of which secrete "honeydew", which provides a perfect growing medium for sooty mold. The

fungus is not harmful to the plant, but the charcoal-colored “soot” can block out sunlight, thus impeding photosynthesis. Horticultural oil or insecticidal soap will help control the insect pests and prevent development of sooty mold.

Other fungal diseases include root rot, powdery mildew, and stem canker. Prevent root rot by checking plant roots before purchasing; buying a resistant variety; and providing good drainage. Powdery mildew causes deformity and yellowing of young leaves and bud drop. Space gardenia plants to provide adequate air circulation and prune out and dispose of diseased debris. Stem cankers form near the soil level. Remove infected tissue and don't over or under fertilize or water.

Root knot nematodes are microscopic roundworms that attack roots, causing galls and aboveground symptoms indicating nutritional deficiency. There is no chemical cure available.

Clemson University publications HGIC 1065 “Gardenia” and HGIC 2058 “Gardenia Diseases & Other Problems” offer detailed information on growing this loveliest of shrubs. Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 430-027 “Trees and Shrubs for Acid Soils” provides detailed information on the pH scale, causes of acid soils, and how to adjust soil pH.

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