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GARDENIA

Rubiaceae

Gardenias are low-growing, bushy shrubs mainly prized for their fragrant flowers. They are not difficult plants to grow, but they require particular attention in order to flower. The only indoor species is *G. jasminoides* (frequently known as *G. grandiflora* or *G. florida*), which is popularly called common gardenia or cape jasmine (though not related to true jasmines). As a potted plant, it rarely exceeds 18 inches in height or spread, even though it is capable of growing 6 feet tall in climates where it is hardy out of doors.

The 4 inch long leaves of *G. jasminoides* are shiny, dark green, leathery, lance-shaped and usually arranged in opposite pairs, but sometimes in whorls of three or more. The flowers, which may be fully double (with many petals) or semi-double (with only two layers of slightly arching petals), are 2-4 inches across and appear, usually singly, from leaf axils near the ends of the shoots. Several forms of the species are cultivated. Among them are *G.j. 'Fortuniana'* (also known as *G.j. 'Florida'*), a less bushy plant with medium size, rather waxy, pure white, many petaled flowers that turn yellow with age; and *G.j. Veitchii*," with dense growth and medium size, many petaled flowers that remain pure white.

Most gardenias bloom naturally during the summer months, but they can be brought into flower in early winter by disbudding (having their flower buds picked off at an early stage) throughout summer and early fall. This process is more usual with *G.j. 'Veitchii'* rather than with other forms.

PROPER CARE

LIGHT:

Gardenias do best in bright light, however, you must always keep them out of direct sunlight.

TEMPERATURE:

The key to success in bringing gardenias to flower is to maintain a steady temperature of 60-75 degrees F during the period when flower buds are forming; a sudden change in either direction is practically certain to cause the buds to drop off. When plants are forming flower buds, the range can be that of a fairly normal room: 60-75 degrees F. A high degree of humidity is also essential when flower buds are forming. To achieve this, stand the pots of trays of moist pebbles or peat moss, and spray plants at least once a day with a fine mist spray (using water that is room temperature). But try not to wet the flowers if plants are in bloom, for water on the petals causes discoloration.

WATERING:

Gardenias do not have a well-defined rest period. They grow less actively, though, during the winter in areas where the winter months bring on a considerable

reduction in light. In such places, water these plants moderately during summer, giving enough at each watering to make the potting mix moist throughout and allowing the top half inch of the mixture to dry out before watering again.

Such reduced winter watering is desirable even with plants that are forced into winter flowering. In areas with less winter reduction of light, water can remain unchanged throughout the year. Always use slightly warm, preferably lime-free water for these plants.

FEEDING:

Apply acid fertilizer every two weeks, but only from March through September, to these 'lime hating' plants.

POTTING:

Most growers use a lime-free potting mixture although they can tolerate a small amount of alkalinity. A mixture of equal parts of leaf mold and peat moss is excellent. If a proprietary peat-based potting mix is used, make sure it is suitable for lime-hating plants, since some are not. Because there is relatively little nutritional value in leaf mold and none in peat moss, it is especially important to give regular feedings (as recommended above) if this mixture is used.

Repot gardenias only when the roots have nearly filled the pot (as indicated at the surface or outside the bottom drainage hole). These plants flower best when in pots that are just a little too small for vigorous stem growth. Any repotting should be done when plants begin new growth in spring and the roots should be disturbed as little as possible.

PROPAGATION:

Gardenias can be propagated from 3 inch long tip cuttings taken in early spring. Dip these in hormone rooting powder, and put them in small pots of moistened peat-based potting mixture suitable for lime-hating plants. Place the potted cutting in a heated propagating tray, or alternatively, enclose them in plastic bags and keep them at a temperature of 60-65 degrees F in bright light filtered through a translucent curtain or blind. Rooting should occur in four to six weeks. In the summer, move the rooted cuttings into pots a size larger containing a potting mix for mature plants. Water them moderately, and feed them at least once a month until they are well developed.

SPECIAL POINTS:

Some early spring pruning is usually necessary to keep them low and bushy. Nip growing points of any long shoots on young plants and cut half or even two-thirds of the wood on mature plants. Be careful, however, not to nip out the flower buds. Stems can always be cut back after the flowers have died. These cuts should be made immediately to points where growth producing buds points outward rather than toward the center of the plant.

