Oleander

Oleanders (*Nerium oleander*) are distinctive and beautiful large, flowering shrubs that thrive with little care. They are very heat and drought-tolerant once established, and will grow especially well in seaside gardens, tolerating salt spray and wind. Oleanders generally grow best in the coastal areas of South Carolina. Most cultivars will be damaged or killed by winter cold in the Midlands and Piedmont.

**Ornamental Features**

Oleanders are usually very large, mounded shrubs that take up considerable space in the landscape. Their quick growth rate and thick multi-stemmed habit makes them ideal for use as a screen or informal hedge.

Oleanders flower from early summer until mid-autumn with large clusters of 2-inch single or double blossoms. Colors range from pure white through pale-yellow, peach, salmon and pink to deep burgundy red. Some varieties (mostly doubles) are fragrant.

**Mature Height/Spread**

Most cultivars will grow to 8 to 12 feet tall and almost as wide as they are tall. In some protected areas mature plants may reach up to 20 feet tall. Some dwarf cultivars stay as low as 3 to 5 feet.

**Growth Rate**

Oleanders grow at a medium to rapid pace, producing 1 to 2 feet or more of growth per year. Established plants that have been damaged by cold will regrow very quickly from the base.

The leaves are smooth, dark green, thick and leathery. They are long and narrow, usually between 4 and 6 inches long and an inch or less wide. The dwarf cultivars also have smaller leaves. Leaves generally grow in whorls.
Landscape Use

Oleanders grow best in full sun and will tolerate even reflected heat from a south or west wall. They will tolerate partial shade, but may have a lanky, open shape.

Oleanders are tolerant of many different soil types, but must have good drainage. They will not do well in wet areas. Oleanders are very drought-tolerant once established, but respond well to occasional deep watering.

Oleanders can be allowed to grow in their natural large mound form, or they can be trained to a small multi-stemmed tree. Since oleanders bloom in summer on new growth, prune them in the early spring. Oleanders will tolerate quite hard spring pruning to remove cold damaged or overgrown wood. Remove dead flower clusters to encourage longer bloom. Cut stem tips off to encourage branching after the flowers are spent, but avoid cutting too late in the fall, as the new growth may not have enough time to harden before frost.

Most oleanders will survive temperatures down to 15 to 20 °F, although their foliage will be damaged. They are typically listed for growing in USDA zones 8b to 10. Even on the coast some winter damage may occur each year. If the tops are killed back by cold, they will recover quickly in spring as long as the roots were not damaged.

Warning

Oleander is extremely poisonous*. Eating even small amounts of any part of the plant can make a person or animal severely ill or cause death. Contact of sap with skin may cause irritation. Smoke from burning cuttings can cause severe reactions.

Problems

Botryosphaeria dieback, caused by the fungus *Botryosphaeria* species causes branches and shoots to die and turn blackish brown. The disease is more likely to occur when plants have been subjected to drought stress or damaged by severe freezes. Prune out all affected branches, making sure that no discolored tissue is left in the cross section.

Oleander caterpillars are the most damaging pest of oleanders. Young oleander caterpillars feed in...
groups, skeletonizing young shoots. Mature
caterpillars are highly visible - up to 2 inches long,
orange-red with black tufts of hair. A severe
infestation can strip a plant bare of leaves in a few
days. While even total defoliation will not kill an
established plant, it will weaken it, and may make it
more susceptible to other pests. Aphids, mealybugs
and scales may also occasionally be problems.

Varieties
In general, cultivars with thicker, dark green,
leathery leaves tend to be harder to cold. Single
flowers usually drop cleanly while spent double
flowers may linger unattractively on the plant. On
the other hand, most fragrant oleanders have double
flowers. Nurseries often sell oleanders by color
rather than by name.

- 'Algiers' grows 5 to 8 feet tall. It is free
  blooming, with single, dark red flowers.
- 'Calypso' is cold hardy and vigorous, growing
  10 to 18 feet tall, with single cherry red
  flowers.
- 'Cardinal Red' grows 6 feet tall and 10 feet
  wide and produces single, bright red flowers.
- 'Hardy Red' is the hardiest cultivar, surviving
even in some protected locations in the
Piedmont, although it may suffer damage in
some winters. The plants grow to 8 feet tall
with very deep red, single flowers. May
tolerate cold in USDA zone 7b.
- 'Hardy Pink' is similar to 'Hardy Red', but
  with salmon pink flowers. May tolerate cold
in USDA zone 7b.
- 'Little Red' (PP#4836) grows from 3 to 6 feet
tall and 3 to 6 feet wide and produces deep
red blooms.
- 'Matilde Ferrier' is often sold as 'Double
  Yellow' and is the most commonly available
yellow flowered oleander. It grows to above 8
feet tall.
- 'Petite Salmon' and 'Petite Pink' are dwarf
  plants that will stay at 3 to 4 feet if lightly
  pruned. They are less cold hardy than most
  oleanders and should only be used in very
  sheltered areas near the coast.
- 'Sealy Pink' grows 8 or more feet tall and 6
  feet wide and blooms with single, silt pink
  flowers.
- 'Sister Agnes' is hardy and vigorous, growing
  10 to 12 feet tall. The large single white
  flowers are self-cleaning. It is often sold
simply as 'White Oleander'.
- Variegated Twist of pink™ grows to 6 to 8
  feet tall and wide, and produces deep pink
  blooms. The foliage has creamy white
  variegation on leaf margins.

*Acute Cardiac Toxicity of Nerium indicum (Oleander) Poisoning.
http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3089829/

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