

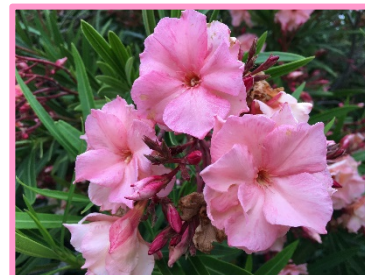


NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

For the Love of Oleanders (August 3, 2024)

By Kate Mackey, Tulare/Kings Counties Master Gardener

Ah, the ubiquitous, evergreen staple of yards and freeway center strips, the Oleander is well known in California's Central Valley. We take this hardy, drought-tolerant, tough plant for granted in our state, but it is revered worldwide for its dark, glossy, evergreen leaves and fragrant blossoms. Wait a minute? Did I say fragrant? Yes! A few years back, I was wandering through my local nursery when a lovely smell got my attention. I asked one of the nurserymen about the scent. It was an Oleander.



I had been around the large, towering Oleanders ("Sister Agnes" cultivar) of my parents' property for years, and its white flowers did not have a scent! This experience took me on a search as a Master Gardener and plant lover to find out more about these "taken for granted" plants. Yes, I know... Oleanders are toxic--especially to farm animals. However, if you look out your window or drive several blocks around town, I bet you will see an oleander. In this drought-stricken valley, oleanders are a great planting choice.

The history of oleanders is shrouded in a certain amount of mystery. We know they grew in ancient times on the riverbanks of the Mediterranean areas. These banks often were dry unless there were heavy rains, so the plants needed to be drought tolerant and yet withstand periodic heavy moisture. We know there were murals of oleanders on the walls of Roman villas, and ancient Chinese scholars would have had oleander flowers in their rooms for scent and beauty. The plant is not mentioned specifically in the Bible, but it is in the Hebrew Talmud many times.

Joseph Pitton de Tournefort, a botanist in the 17th century, established the genus of *Nerion* in 1700, and Linnaeus, the father of modern taxonomy, latinized the name to *Nerium*. Oleanders gained popularity in Europe in the 1600 and 1700's and were brought to the New World by the Spaniards in the 1700's. Their use spread throughout the United States, and they are a staple now of landscapes in California.



Characteristics:

The Oleander is in the *Apocynaceae* or Dogbane family, and it includes shrubs such as the Star Jasmine, Mandevilla, and Plumeria. Oleander leaves are simple and narrow. The inflorescence (flower part) is usually on the tips of the branches. The flowers come in a wide variety of colors, from white to coral, from the pink to dark red. There is even a relative, the *Cascabela thetevia*, that has yellow flowers. Oleanders can grow up to three feet a year! There have been Oleanders that lived for almost one hundred years. They tolerate a wide variety of soil types and need little fertilizing unless the soil is very poor, or they are grown in container.

Hardiness:

Since this plant originated in the Mediterranean area, it grows best in the USDA Hardness zones 8 to 10. Although they can withstand freezing temperatures of 15 to 20 degrees for a short while, they will be damaged if exposed for any length of time. However, a light frost rarely kills the plants, and even if they should die back to the ground, they are likely to come back in the spring.

Propagation:

Oleanders are easily propagated from cuttings. The best time to propagate is in the late spring when the plant is growing. Take a tip cutting 8 – 10 inches long or a stem cutting 5" to 8" long from the middle or lower branches. The cutting should have at least two sets of leaf nodes. Gently pull off all the leaves except the top whorl and trim those leaves to about one inch to decrease moisture loss during the rooting. They can be rooted in water with a rooting hormone, but they will get off to a better start if rooted in a solid medium like coarse sand or perlite that has been well-watered. Apply a rooting hormone to the cutting and insert it into the perlite. Water the cuttings, and place the plant in a warm place, sunny but not direct sun. You should have roots starting in a couple of weeks. Water to keep the cuttings damp but never wet. Do not rush this process. You can keep them in the rooting soil until they have a good "mop" of leaves.

Once the plants have a good strong root system, soak the container in lukewarm water and then gently tease the cuttings out. Don't worry about the perlite that is clinging to the roots. This method of rooting produces a minimum of root damage. Plant your new plants in potting soil with sand or perlite added for drainage.

Let your Oleanders get used to the outside weather gradually over a week, and then they are ready for planting in the ground. If they are going to remain in containers, they will need periodic fertilizing with a 10-10-10 fertilizer once a month during the growing season--but when fall comes, cut back on the water as the plants will go into their dormant period.

Prune oleanders for shape or to keep them small. Dispose of the pruning in the green waste and DO NOT BURN, as all parts of the plant are toxic. Do not use the branches for crafts or for roasting marshmallows.

With care, you will have an oleander plant that will reward you with beauty and scent from summer through fall.

The Tulare-Kings Counties Master Gardeners will answer your questions in person:

Visalia Farmer's Market, 1st & 3rd Saturdays, 8 - 11 am, Tulare Co. Courthouse

Hanford Thursday Night Farmers' Market, 219 W Lacey Blvd, Hanford, 5:30 pm, through Sept.

Questions? Call the Master Gardeners:

Tulare County: (559) 684-3325, Tues & Thurs, 9:30-11:30;

Kings County: (559) 852-2736, Thursday Only, 9:30-11:30 a.m

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