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A Basic Guide to Growing Plumerias



The Plumeria or Frangipani are native to tropical areas of Central and South America but have long been famous as flowers for the Hawaiian lei adding their wonderful colors and fragrance to the lei's beauty. These summer flowering, small tropical trees or large shrubs lend their form and beauty to the summer garden and particularly in tropical settings. Plumerias seem to revel in the heat and humidity of Louisiana summers flowering profusely with good care. Their flower color can range from white, through pinks and reds, orange, yellow, and even into purple. The individual flowers are often multicolored, may be variegated with splashes and flecks, and in one rare hybrid, Bali Whirl, the flowers are double. Not only are the flowers beautiful but the fragrances seem to vary from plant to plant and can range from a soft to rich floral perfume, to fruity, and even spicily scented. The flower clusters are born in large clusters at the terminals and at points where the plant is branching. The large long-lasting clusters can contain as many as 200 buds that will open up over a period that can last for over 4 months.

The Plumeria is as easy to care for as it is to enjoy, given appropriate growing conditions. They prefer a slightly acidic, moderately fertile, well-drained soil and will do best if given full to mostly sunny conditions. Providing good air circulation will also help to reduce the chances for diseases or insect infestations to take hold. It is considered to be moderately to highly salt tolerant and somewhat wind resistant making it suitable as a landscape plant in coastal areas

where winter temperatures remain above 40°F. They may survive a light frost but can be much less prone to flower the following season as buds are born on last season's growth.

Plumerias have a moderate to slow rate of growth and can easily reach 6-10'H x 4-6'W as a container plant. In the ground, in frost free climates they may reach 20-30'H and wide. In either case they can be kept smaller with pruning and the cuttings can be rooted or shared if desired. Most pruning is done in winter or spring before growth begins. This allows the plants to still flower in the same year although it may be later in the summer before they do. Pollarding, a form of pruning in Louisiana also known as 'Crape Murder', is also used to keep plants smaller but they may not always flower the following season or if they do it will likely be much later in the year before they do.

Moisture levels are important and the Plumeria's needs change as the seasons change. When in active growth, like during spring and summer, they will need average moist to moderately moist soils. Use caution not to leave standing water in a saucer for more than about 45 minutes except in extreme cases. It is much easier to kill a Plumeria with too much water than with not enough. If kept too wet the Plumeria can become susceptible to various diseases that can lead to rot. When you do water, water thoroughly to fully saturate the entire root ball of the plant but remember to let the top 1" or so of soil to dry out between waterings. In late fall, once the foliage starts to drop, you can reduce watering frequency and in winter when they are completely dormant very minimal to no water is required on the deciduous types. A well-draining, cactus like soil for container grown plants will help to prevent this. Adding 1-part sand, fine gravel, hadite or other similar material will help to give the soil good porosity as well as adding weight to the container which may or may not be a good thing when you have to move it. We've seen Styrofoam, perlite, vermiculite, peat, coir, and lava rock in Plumeria soil over the years, just be sure that you use enough organic matter to give it the drainage they need while still having sufficient moisture and fertilizer retention for proper growth and stability. It seems that the lighter the soil the more staking is required.



When growing the Frangipani as a container plant it is important to make sure that the container and root ball are heavy enough to prevent a good wind storm from blowing it over and ultimately breaking the plant. You may want to consider tying it off to a good support if that is at all in question. Plunging the container into the ground is another method where container and all are 'planted' in the spring. This provides good support for the plant, as well as giving the roots a chance to utilize moisture and nutrients from the garden soil and still gives you an easy way to 'transplant' it in fall with minimal shock. If planting or 'plunging' your Plumeria into the ground in spring you will want to wait until daytime temperatures are sufficiently warm and all danger of frost has passed. For our

area here in SW Louisiana, mid-April/May should be acceptable. It is generally a good idea to stake newly transplanted Plumerias. You'll want to use a material that is relatively strong but that can expand as the stem grows, without cutting into it. Any material you use should be checked and adjusted or replaced periodically to prevent damage to the stem as it is growing. You may also want to consider securing a layer of a soft material between the stem and horizontal supports to protect the stem from rubbing and getting damaged.

To store typical container grown winter deciduous Plumerias you can simply allow the soil to go dry in fall once the leaves start to drop naturally and before the first frost and you can basically quit watering until spring. Large plants that have been transplanted from the garden can be overwintered with or without soil on the root ball but the roots should be kept in the dark wrapped in newspaper or similar material. The stems of Plumerias that are kept dry over winter may shrivel slightly but quickly overcome it once watering begins anew in spring. Younger plants may need a small amount of water once a month or so to help minimize these effects. Once dormant, most Plumerias need no light or water until spring and can be easily stored in any frost-free area like the garage, one person mentioned that they stored theirs in a closet. One thing to note is that this method is for the naturally deciduous *Plumeria rubra* types and similar hybrids but not for the evergreen types like Dwarf Singapore Pink. The evergreen types should be kept on the dry side during winter as it is easy to keep them too wet when they are not in active growth. Either one can be overwintered in a well-lit area, preferably with direct sunlight through a window and the *Plumeria rubra* types may even retain leaves over winter under these conditions if kept suitably warm with ample sunlight. The deciduous types will also be most likely to flower better if given good light in winter with a minimally moist soil.



In the event that a wayward branch gets broken or you end up with cuttings from pruning or a friend it is easy enough to start a new plant from an 8-24" long cutting. Place the cutting in a moderately dry, shaded area and allow it to heal for about 2 weeks. Some people even been known to use a blow-torch to quickly seal the ends of cuttings. Once sufficiently dried and cured the cutting can then be potted into a container with a good quality soil and placed in a semi-shaded but still brightly lit area until it is well rooted. We generally plant ours deep enough that they can support themselves, about 1/3 of the cutting depth, but a stake is a good investment to help keep the cutting stable while it is establishing a root system. Many sources suggest using a powdered rooting hormone to help with root development and some may even help prevent fungal infections. Moisture is critical during the rooting process and the cuttings should be kept on the dry side of moist until they have gone into active growth (generally 6-12 weeks) at which point they will be able to tolerate more direct sunlight.

In order to grow and flower the Plumeria will need ample nutrients. Most resources suggest a fertilize that is high in Phosphorous and lower in Nitrogen and Potassium. The University of Hawaii at Manoa's Extension [publication](#) OF-24 suggests that a granular 1030-10 fertilize be applied monthly at a rate of 1 lb. of fertilize per inch of trunk diameter during the growing season, but realize that this applies to Plumeria in a landscape setting. Other sources suggest using a balanced fertilize in spring, followed by increased Phosphorous (Superphosphate or Triple Superphosphate) at bud set. Additional resources suggest adding micronutrients and Epsom salts (Magnesium Sulphate) as needed. We generally use a balanced, slow-release, non-burning fertilizer with an NPK of 14-14-14. Bring them outdoors in spring once daytime temperatures are sufficiently warm, above 60°F, and all danger of frost has passed. This is a good time to think about fertilizing them as well. They can be planted or 'plunged' safely in our area here in west central Louisiana by mid-April or early May most years. Some growers suggest that these plants can be cut off at the ground before the first frost and placed in a garage or other frost-free location for winter but this generally is not the most desirable method as it is preferable to start the next season with a root system whenever possible to help ensure the maximum amount of flowering.



Under good cultural conditions Plumerias will have few if any pest or disease problems. They can be susceptible to Plumeria rust and other fungal and bacterial diseases as well as insects like spider mites, scales, whiteflies, and mealybugs. In Florida there is even a Sphinx moth caterpillar that enjoys Plumeria foliage. Providing good drainage, ample sunlight, good air circulation, and applying proper watering techniques will help to keep your Plumerias healthy and flowering all summer as well as to minimize the chance for disease or insects to be a problem.

Thank You & Good Growing,
The Crew at Almost Eden
Phone: 337-375-2114
AlmostEdenPlants.com

University of Hawaii at Manoa Cooperative Extension Service: <http://www2.ctahr.hawaii.edu/oc/freepubs/pdf/OF-24.pdf>
University of Florida Extension Gardening in a Minute: Plumeria:
http://gardeningsolutions.ifas.ufl.edu/giam/plants_and_grasses/flowering_plants/plumeria.html Plumeria Society of
America: <http://www.theplumeriasociety.org/>