

## A Flowering Quince Dilemma

By Susan Camp

Gardening problems can be complex and challenging, and if I can't examine the plant, I have to respond in general terms. Often my response is simply, "I don't know. I'll have to look that up."

Last Friday night, I was asked a question about flowering quince shrubs, failing from what the owners believe is a scale insect infestation. From their description of the shrubs' appearance, it is likely that they are correct. They report falling leaves and scale-like growths on the twigs and branches. They have mailed a sample from one of the distressed plants to the lab at VA Tech, a wise action. Unfortunately, response from the lab can take several weeks, and our friends are afraid the shrubs won't make it through a cold winter.

Since I have never grown flowering quince, I had to hit the internet. This deciduous shrub, *Chaenomeles speciosa*, which bears a name that sounds like a magic spell from a Harry Potter book, will fade into the background most of the year, then bloom in a splendid display of 2 ½ inch, five-petaled white, pink, salmon, or scarlet blossoms in late winter or early spring.

A member of the rose family, flowering quince is easy to grow and hard to kill—good news for our friends. The shrub requires full sun to partial shade and average, well-drained soil with medium moisture. The mature plant is drought-tolerant and will thrive in acidic to slightly alkaline soil in USDA Hardiness Zones 4 through 8.

A mature flowering quince reaches 6 to 10 feet in height, with a spread of similar size. Sometimes planted as a specimen, it often is used in a hedge or garden screen. The sharp spines on the branches make the plant difficult to penetrate. The hard, speckled, yellow-green fruit is edible, but very astringent when eaten raw, and is most often made into jelly or marmalade.

As a member of the rose family, flowering quince is susceptible to leafspot, especially during hot, humid weather. Powdery mildew, rust, and fire blight can affect it. Insect pests include various species of armored scales, including oystershell scale, and soft scales like black scale, which produce honeydew. Other insect pests include aphids, mealybugs, leafroller caterpillars, and roundheaded appletree borers.

Until our friends receive a response from VA Tech about their sample, it is difficult to suggest actions to take to save the shrubs. Neem oil spray, which has low toxicity for people and animals, will destroy the scale. Insecticidal soap and canola oil products are other low-toxicity possibilities.

Our friends' most pressing concern is proper pruning. They would like to prune the shrubs down to the ground, but are afraid that this will kill the shrubs. Several sources presented differing opinions on pruning flowering quince, from no pruning ever, to light pruning, to heavy pruning once every three to five years. The conflict appears to arise from confusion between flowering

quince and common quince (*Cydonia oblonga*). To compound the confusion, some writers use the term “common” to describe both plants. Flowering quince blooms on last year’s wood and common quince blooms on new wood.

As with any plant, prune out dead, damaged, or rubbing branches anytime to stave off insect predation or infection. Remove up to one-quarter of old branches close to the ground during winter dormancy to open the shrub and allow air to circulate. Burn all debris.

If the shrub is overgrown and leggy, with woody branches and poor fruit production, consider cutting it to the ground in early spring. Prune drastically only if there is no more than one dead branch on the bush. The bush will regrow from the roots, but will not produce flowers the first year. This type of pruning may rejuvenate shrubs infested with scale, and is worth trying.

The Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Finder entry “*Chaenomeles speciosa*” and the University of California Integrated Pest Management publication “Pests in Gardens and Landscapes” provide helpful information on this lovely shrub.

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