

## Camellia, the Southern Beauty

By Susan Camp

Earlier this summer, a friend asked me what I knew about camellias, and I thought to myself, “Not as much as I probably should.” She explained that her camellias didn’t look healthy this year, so I decided to investigate the care of these lovely shrubs.

Camellias are the pride of many gardens in USDA Plant Hardiness Zones 7 to 9, different varieties blooming from September through March. Camellias are slow-growing broadleaf evergreen shrubs or small trees, native to eastern Asia and India, but cultivated in the southern United States since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. As many as 250 species may exist, with more than 2000 cultivars registered by the American Camellia Society. In our region, *Camellia japonica* and *Camellia sasanqua* are the most frequently planted species. *Camellia vernalis* ‘Yuletide’, which blooms in November, is a popular winter holiday cultivar.

*Camellia japonica* is the larger of the two popular species, sometimes growing to a height of 25 feet or taller. It has a spread of 10 feet, with an upright growth habit and leathery, dark-green 4 inch leaves. The white, pink, or red flowers are 3 to 5 inches in diameter and are classified as single, semi-double, double, formal double, or full peony form, according to Clemson University Extension Publication HGIC 1062. *Camellia japonica* blooms from late winter to early spring. It probably will not survive winter temperatures below 0 degrees Fahrenheit.

Fall-blooming *Camellia sasanqua* slightly more winter hardy than *Camellia japonica*. *Camellia sasanqua* can reach a height of 1 ½ to 12 feet, either upright or spreading and bushy. The dark green leaves are 2 inches long and the fragrant single or semi-double flowers are 2 to 3 inches in diameter. Flower colors are white, red, pink, lavender, or purple.

All varieties of camellia have similar planting and care requirements. They need well-drained sandy loam with a pH of 5.5 to 6.8 in a shady spot with protection from winter winds. A soil test will tell you if you need to amend the soil. Drainage and fertility can be improved with the addition of leaf mold, sawdust, aged cow manure, or other organic material. Camellias generally are planted between late fall and early spring. They should be mulched with no more than 4 inches of straw or other organic material and watered well after planting. Camellias roots are shallow, so new plants will need to be watered deeply every week, especially during dry weather and when they are flowering. They should be fertilized in March, May, and July with the appropriate fertilizer for acid-loving plants, according to the American Camellia Society website, which offers extensive, detailed information on planting and caring for camellias. Avoid overfertilizing, which can cause burnt leaf edges and leaf drop. Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 2901-1051 provides basic information on *Camellia japonica*.

Sunburn and dehydration from winter winds can cause leaf scorch and yellowing. Chlorosis presents as yellow leaves with green veins and results from planting in neutral or alkaline soil. Treat chlorotic plants with chelated iron and amend the soil to lower the pH.

Pests that affect camellias include tea scale, tiny insects that secrete honeydew, which serves as a medium for sooty mold, causing leaves to turn yellow and drop. Tea scale can be treated with horticultural oil. Camellia petal blight is a fungal disease that causes flowers to turn brown and camellia leaf gall, also caused by a fungus, results in leaf distortion and drop. Fallen blossoms and leaf litter should be burned.

All varieties of camellia tend to drop buds, as the plants set more buds than they can open. Drought, a sudden cold spell, and overwatering also can cause bud drop, so it pays to be aware of water and temperature conditions if sudden bud drop occurs.

Once they are established and with some tender loving care, camellias can provide many years of beautiful flowers and rich foliage during the fall and winter months.

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