

Ah, Camellias!

It was in 1948 that the United States National Arboretum obtained a cultivar of *Camellia oleifera*, the tea oil camellia which had been used in China for thousands of years. Its oil was important in the making of cosmetics as well as in cooking. However, it was not imported for its beauty but for the fact that it was hardy in zone 5. We think of these elegant evergreens as belonging to our zone 7 and south to zone 9. But using *C. oleifera* in crosses over the decades, as well as input from more glamorous cultivars, hybridizers can now offer plants hardy as far north as Boston or Buffalo!

Two of the newest cultivar names give a hint: ‘Snow Flurry’ and ‘Polar Ice’. A series of “Ice angels” is sure to lift spirits in winter – ‘April Remembered’, ‘Winter’s Fire’, ‘Winter’s Snowman’. We don’t think of camellias as cut flowers but if you picked them for your Christmas or New Year’s table, you surely noticed how long they lasted. That bloom gathering is really all they need in the way of pruning, aside from cutting out the dead or broken bits and, if the shrub has become too dense for good air circulation, pruning a little to open up the interior.

Our climate does not have zone 5 cold but because we have so many warm spells that encourage the sap to ‘think spring’, plants can be assaulted by sudden shifts in temperature. My large pink camellia was hung with sodden brown lumps after that bit of Buffalo weather so I wonder if the blooms as well as the plant itself will survive in those bitter cold gardens?

Another development holds promise for those of us who think camellia beauty could be enhanced by fragrance. Turning again to China, breeders are working with the fragrant *C. yuhsienensis*. Truth to tell, camellias are so lovely we should be grateful just to have one in our garden, but....

Even if you do not have the ideal piney woods spot for them they will flourish on the north side of your house. I have one planted near a window, now taller than the window so it is fortunate that it was not planted directly in front of it. Some cultivars promise to stay small, especially the smaller leaved *Sasanquas* but as a rule camellias are not foundation plants. They grow gloriously high and wide so give them space. That said, there are some small enough to be happy in large pots which may be brought into a sheltered spot for the winter.

Camellias should be planted like a tree – a wide hole, not a deep one. Leave the soil firm beneath it so it won’t sink and succumb. Another caveat: don’t give it a lush environment. That applies to anything you are planting. The instinct is to baby it with gobs of soil amendments instead of using the soil you have excavated with a little compost. If you pamper those roots they will never leave home searching for nourishment. I usually shake off the mixture that a shrub was potted in so the roots can grab some real dirt but that probably isn’t necessary as they will work their way out eventually.

Another precaution: examine your purchase. I was so pleased to find C. 'Yuletide' in a big box store, I didn't notice until I planted it that it was not a shrub, but three rooted cuttings without a decent set of roots among them. Only one bit is still struggling. On the other hand, the two I got from Fairweather Gardens in Greenwich, N.J. are worth the investment.

When I feed the azaleas and hollies in spring I give the same acid product to the camellias. I did topdress several shrubs with some ancient horse manure then covered that with pine nuggets-- mostly because at the end of a hot August the ground looked in need of a little 'cooling' TLC, and because horse manure is not very vibrant manure as such things go and it was free. Mulch is needed to steady soil temperature but peat moss is not a good idea. It is not a renewable resource for one thing and it dries out and become impenetrable to rain or watering for another.

I occasionally notice some euonymous scale which I rub off wearing gloves, ugh, but haven't noticed any brown scale. Scale can be thwarted with horticultural oils used late winter. I got some oil at Southern States and read the directions carefully and decided my problems did not require that much hard work. The blessed thing about gardening is that even with rampant imperfections, it's a beautiful world!