

Camellia



Camellias are a stunning group of plants that grace gardens with single, semi-double and double blooms in shades of pink, white and red either in the spring or the fall. They are shade-loving, evergreen shrubs which prefer acidic soil. In our growing area, they reach about 8 feet in height. Their growth rate is moderate, slightly less than a foot a year.

Spring and Fall Bloomers

There are two species of garden camellias which are generally available from nurseries in the Washington, D.C. area:

Camellia japonica: late winter/early spring blooming plants, which have large, corsage-size flowers.

Camellia sasanqua: late summer/fall blooming plants, which have smaller flowers and smaller leaves than the japonicas.

Location

When selecting a location for camellias, two major considerations must be addressed. First, they require an area which is shady or partly sunny. The term “partly sunny” means that camellias will benefit from some sunlight, but direct afternoon sunlight, especially in the summer, will cause the leaves to scorch. The plants should be shaded or receive only dappled or filtered sunlight in the afternoon. Secondly, camellias will suffer winter damage in cold weather, if not sheltered in some way. Super-cold air will draw moisture from the leaves and “freeze-dry” them.

Although they prefer to be grown in a north or west exposure, camellias must be protected from the cold winter winds in these areas. (See Winter Care.)

Planting Camellias

Plant camellias in spring or early fall. Dig a hole that is at least twice the diameter of the plant’s root ball. When the plant is placed in the hole, the depth of the hole should be such that the top one inch of the plant’s rootball is above the soil grade (for better drainage and to compensate for settling of the soil). Backfill around the soil ball with a

mixture of 1/3 well-rotted compost or peat humus and 2/3 soil from the hole. Pack firmly. Soak the soil with plenty of water, and cover the soil around the plant with 2 to 3 inches of mulch. Water the newly-planted camellia every other day for the first two weeks.

Feeding and Pruning

Fertilize camellias in the spring, after they finish blooming. A fertilizer for acid-loving plants, such as cottonseed meal or Espoma Holly-Tone® is ideal. Camellias are not heavy feeders and should not be over-fertilized. Pruning is not a normal requirement, since the plant grows at a moderate rate. The pruning of healthy branches for the purpose of shaping or limiting growth should be done in the spring, after the plants have bloomed. The pruning of dead, damaged or unhealthy branches can be done at any time.

Pest Control

The list of common camellia pests is very short. Among insect pests, cottony camellia scale is the most common. This is a long, white, cottony insect that sticks to the undersides of the leaves and feeds on sap from the plant. Another common camellia insect pest is the aphid, a small, light-colored, bulb-shaped insect that feeds on sap from new growth. New leaves become curled and deformed. Contact the experts at Behnke's for current recommended controls for these pests.

In addition to insect pests, young tender camellia leaves serve as a nice snack for deer. If your plants suffer this fate, fence in small plants or cover them with a black netting for their first few years. As the plants grow larger and the leaves toughen up the deer problem should subside (except during seasons where the deer's regular food supplies are compromised, such as a drought).

Other Plant Problems

Problems that camellias may face are not always from living organisms. Environmental conditions can cause plant problems as well. If there is a hard freeze (temperatures low enough to cause "burn" damage to plant tissue) as the flower buds are opening, freeze damage to the flower petals is likely to occur. Also, if the soil becomes less acid (rises above pH 6.5), iron cannot be assimilated into the plant and chlorosis may occur. Chlorosis is a condition where the normally green leaves become yellowed, with the only green color just along the leaf veins. This can be remedied by an application of iron sulfate to the soil.

Winter Care

Camellias in the open require special protection during the winter. The preferred method of protection is to construct a temporary barrier around the plant, starting in mid-November. Place four tall wooden stakes on four corners surrounding the plant, just high enough to reach to the top of the camellia. Wrap burlap around the stakes, creating a screen from the bottom to the top. Fill the space within the barrier screen with loose material, such as dried leaves or straw. This will insulate the camellia from the cold, while allowing air to flow through the insulating material.

Remove the barrier in late-February or early-March.

If left in a sheltered area, but not screened, it is recommended that the leaves of the camellia be sprayed with an antidesiccant spray. This is a polymer coating that may seal the leaves sufficiently to reduce water loss through the leaves in extremely cold weather.

Special Winter-Hardy Camellias

Through the research efforts of the US National Arboretum in Washington, D.C., a number of winter-hardy sasanqua hybrid camellias have been developed. These camellias are cold-hardy down to -10° F. They are available at Behnke's and have names such as 'Winter Star', 'Winter Water Lily', 'Winter Rose' and 'Polar Ice.' These varieties are all fall-bloomers; so far there are no consistently cold-hardy spring blooming hybrids available.





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