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Camellia Care & Culture

Stunning and fabulous are two good ways to describe camellias. Add easy-to-grow to that list, too. This classic Southern plant features incomparable, often pristinely gorgeous, flowers either in fall or late winter/early spring and has lustrous evergreen foliage. They make excellent accent plants, specimens, or low privacy screens. Winter/Spring blooming Japanese camellias (*Camellia japonica*), fall-blooming camellias (typically *C. sasanqua*), and tea camellias (*C. sinensis*) as well as a few hybrids are typically available in our region (and, yes, you CAN grow your own tea!) Here are some tips for growing them and troubleshooting any problems.

LIGHT: Camellias are adaptable to a range of light conditions but they mainly prefer morning sun with afternoon shade or bright dappled light all day. Avoid hot, scorching afternoon sun locations for planting, especially those that are windy. Some camellias are more sun tolerant than others, typically the fall-blooming sasanqua types. Those grown in sun usually look a bit sunburned while they are young. Those that tolerate it, eventually become accustomed to their site.

PLANTING: Camellias like well-drained, acid soil with plenty of organic matter. Amend the soil when planting with a pine bark soil conditioner or Permatill or a mix of the two such as Daddy Pete's Plant Pleaser Plus Permatill. See our *Planting Guide for Trees & Shrubs* for specific directions and diagrams on planting (available in store or on the website Garden Tips page). Never plant camellias so that the base of the trunk is below the soil line and do not permit soil or mulch to wash over the base of the trunk and cover it. Do mulch over the root zone area with your mulch of choice to a depth of 2-3".

Camellias are also excellent container plants. Put plants that came in 3 or 5 gallon pots into half-barrel or 20"-24" pots. Use a planting mix that is heavy in pine bark fines or make a mix that is 50% regular fluffy potting soil and 50% pine bark soil conditioner. Avoid soil mixes with fertilizer already mixed in.

WATERING: Camellias need regular water for the first three years in the ground. Young plants can and will die on you if they get too dry. "Regular water" means watering enough to soak the rootball 1-2 times a week in spring and fall, and 2-3 times a week in summer for the first year. It's good to water newbies during late winter dry spells, too. Once established they can survive on natural rainfall. Old camellias are quite drought tolerant.

FERTILIZING: Fertilizing is beneficial but take care not to overfertilize as this can predispose the plants to winter injury. Use a complete, commercial acid plant food formulated for trees and shrubs such as Holly-tone and don't use more than called for on the label.

PRUNING: Prune after flowering. You can prune how you like to get the form you want: Cut back the top to make lanky shrubs more bushy. Thin out the bottom to form a patio tree. Shorten lower branches to promote more upright growth. It's always a good idea to remove any wood that is dead or weak. If plants become so dense that flowers have no room to open properly, thin the branches to open up the plants.

TROUBLESHOOTING: Camellias don't tend to have too many problems if they have been planted properly and get enough water but here are a couple of things to look out for:

- Tea Scale: This is the most important insect pest on camellias. Small brown/gray insects that look more like scabs than bugs (female) on the leaf underside, often with a bunch of white ones (male) as well as cottony, web-like accumulations. The upper surface of the leaf can have yellow blotches and pale speckles. Prevent by spraying with horticultural oil spray after plants have bloomed. You can also treat with this spray to control existing infestations or use a systemic insecticide labeled for scale insects. The oil spray has the added benefit of smothering eggs. Avoid spraying oil sprays when temperatures are above 85°F.

- Camellia Petal Blight: A serious fungal disease that lives in the soil and causes the flowers to turn brown. Can be confused with other problems that damage flowers such as cold damage. Suspect it if the brown areas on the flower rapidly spreads to the center of the flower and the flower browns and drops within 24-48 hours. Sanitation is the best control for this. Pull off and destroy all infected flowers. Rake up and remove all leaves, flowers, debris, and mulch. Replace with fresh mulch. For serious infestations, spray with a fungicide such as liquid copper.

