

Camellias for East Texas Gardens

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Camellia japonica bushes are in full bloom, adding a bright spot to the otherwise dreary winter landscape. Its glossy green foliage and winter blooms beautiful enough for the most elegant table settings have made the camellia a favorite in southern gardens since the mid-nineteenth century. The beauty of the blossoms rivals that of the rose and peony, while the foliage is attractive all year long.

According to an article by Dr. Bill Welch that appeared in a Texas A& M “Horticulture Update”, January 2001, “Specimens of *Camellia japonica* mark the site of many important plantations and homesteads throughout the South. Camellias have been important to southern gardeners from the mid-1800s to the present. Unlike old garden roses, that may be rooted fairly easily from cuttings and were grown in nearly every southern garden, camellias have always been favorites in upscale gardens where the relatively high cost of the plants and difficulty in propagating them were not as significant. Although japonica camellias sometimes set seeds that can be germinated, most are reproduced from cuttings or grafted onto sasanqua rootstocks.”

Camellia japonica, a native of China, blooms in mid-winter until early spring in shades varying from white to red. Varieties with single, semi-double or double flowers are available. It grows slowly and will reach 5 to 15 feet tall, making it an ideal specimen shrub. *Camellia sasanqua*, a native of Japan, is usually a smaller shrub, blooms from October until late December, and tolerates colder temperatures than the japonicas. There

are also dwarf varieties of the sasanqua available at area nurseries. If you plant both japonica and sasanqua you will have fresh flowers available from late October through March.

Camellias need light shade, like under tall pine trees. They need some sun to flower, so morning sun and afternoon shade that protects them from our hot afternoon sun is best. Choose a site that is protected from cold winter winds, to protect the winter blossoms on the japonica.

The soil should be acidic, in a site that drains well and has been enriched with organic matter. Camellias can be planted from late fall to early spring, setting the plant at the level at which it grew in the pot. Use pine straw mulch to keep the soil moist and weed free.

While established camellias will tolerate some drought, be sure to provide water during dry spells. Feed camellias with camellia fertilizer in the spring when they finish blooming, following package instructions. Prune any dead or damaged wood in early spring to ensure you don't remove next year's buds.

Camellias are available in area nurseries. A camellia bush would make an ideal Valentine gift for your favorite gardener, and you will have flowers for romantic dinners for many winters to come!