Camellia

*Camellia sasanqua*

Camellias are large, attractive, broad-leaved, evergreen shrubs that are highly prized for their flowers, which bloom from winter to spring. There are more than 2,300 named cultivars registered with the American Camellia Society. In South Carolina the primary camellias used include cultivars of Japanese camellia (*Camellia japonica*), Sasanqua camellia (*C. sasanqua*), tea-oil camellia (*C. oleifera*), other species (*C. sinensis* or tea camellia) and many hybrids using two other species extensively (*C. reticulata* and *C. salvenensis*).

**Mature Height/Spread**

Common Japanese Camellia (*Camellia japonica*) is a broadleaved, evergreen shrub, which may grow to a height of 25 feet, but more often to 6 to 12 feet. It has a spread of 6 to 10 feet. The dark-green leathery leaves are 4 inches long. The flowers, which range in color from white to pink and red, are 3 to 5 inches in diameter. They flower on different varieties from September until April. The flowers may be single, semi-double, or double.

Some Japanese camellias, around the emperor’s palace in Japan, are known to be more than 500 years old. Camellia sasanqua is a broad-leaved evergreen shrub, varying in form from upright and densely bushy to low and spreading. Heights range from 1½ to 12 feet tall. The leaves are dark green, shiny and about 2 inches long. They are usually darker green and smaller than the leaves of *C. japonica* or *C. reticulata*. The flowers are mostly white and single, 2 to 3 inches in diameter, and very fragrant.

Camellia oleifera is a large shrub to 20 feet tall with glossy, dark green leaves and fragrant, 2-inch-wide flowers in fall.

Camellia reticulata has some of the biggest and most spectacular flowers, but is a rather gaunt and open shrub, about 10 feet tall and 8 feet wide. This species is very susceptible to cold. Mild frost will kill the plant. *C. reticulata* hybridized with *C. japonica* or *C. salvenensis* results in excellent hybrids.

**Growth Rate**

Camellias grow very slowly. They can grow to be quite old. Some hundred-year-old plants may reach 25 feet high or more and as wide, but most gardeners can consider camellias to be 10-foot-tall shrubs. Many are even lower growing. *C. sasanqua* varieties are faster growing than *C. japonica*.

**Landscape Use**

Camellias are used as specimen large shrubs, shrub borders and screens. The main ornamental feature is their showy flowers.
**Cultivation**
Camellias need well-drained soil rich in organic material for establishment. Because camellias are slow-growers, they are slow to get established. Competition for water is the one critical thing in establishment. They thrive and bloom best when sheltered from full sun and drying winds. Older camellia plants can thrive in full sun when they are mature enough to have their roots shaded by a heavy canopy of leaves.

Camellias can be planted any time of the year (preferably from mid-October to November and from mid-March to mid-April) provided they are properly planted and mulched and checked for water frequently. Camellias are shallow-rooted plants. They must be planted shallowly. It is recommended to dig a large, deep planting hole to cut the roots of neighboring trees, which will otherwise compete for water with the newly planted camellia. Also remove stones and break up heavy clay soils. Partially fill the hole with loose soil before planting the camellia shallowly.

Soil moisture should be conserved by using a 2- to 3-inch layer of mulch. Camellias prefer a slightly acid soil and light applications of acid plant food may be used to maintain dark-green, attractive foliage. Follow the instructions on the fertilizer label. Do not use more than called for. Burned leaf edges and excessive leaf drop usually indicate overfertilizing.

Some flower bud dropping may be a natural phenomenon. Many camellias set more buds than they can open. Bud drop can be caused by underwatering in the summer.

Camellias require very little pruning except for the removal of damaged branches and long shoots that detract from the attractive form of the shrub. Cutting back severely (no leaves left) can be done safely from Valentine’s Day to around May 1. Cutting out the dead and weak stems can be done anytime.

**Problems**
Three diseases are serious on camellias in South Carolina:
- Dieback and canker
- Root rot
- Camellia flower blight

For more information on diseases and insect pests on camellia refer to HGIC 2053, Camellia Diseases & Insect Pests.

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