

Showtime for Camellias

By Larry Figart, Extension Agent with University of Florida / Duval County Extension Service



Photo Credit: Larry Figart UF/IFAS

If there was ever a plant that was considered royalty in southern landscapes the camellias would undoubtedly be it. They have been grown in our gardens for over 200 years. With origins in Asia, it is thought that there are over 20,000 varieties of camellias grown throughout the world. In the Shinto religion, it is said when the gods came to visit earth, they made camellia flowers their home. Interestingly, most popular camellia in the world is not known for its flowers but for its leaves. *Camellia sinensis* is the plant whose leaves are harvested for the caffeinated green and black tea beverage.

There are over 2,300 named camellia cultivars registered with the American Camellia Society. The camellias we grow in the landscape in Florida are typically *Camellia japonica*, *Camellia sasanqua*, and their varieties, and hybrids. *Camellia japonica* cultivars and hybrids are the most common camellias we see in North Florida because of the availability of unique plants. These broadleaved evergreen shrubs usually reach a mature size of 6-12 feet with a spread of 6-10 feet and typically have the more stunning blooms. *Camellia sasanqua* plants are typically smaller at 1 ½ - 6 feet in height. They typically tolerate sunnier sites. The leaves are darker green and smaller as well. The blooms are usually smaller, but fragrant and more abundant.

Camellias are usually planted in groups or in mass plantings rather than by themselves. Unfortunately, they require a precise arrangement of conditions in order to grow well. They do best when planted under filtered/ shifting sunlight in soil with a high amount of organic matter.

Showtime for Camellias_(pg. 2)

They require a slightly acidic soil with a pH between 5.5 and 6. They need a well-drained but moist soil, so do not plant them in sites with high water tables and poorly drained soils. Japonica varieties should be spaced about 10 feet apart and sasanqua varieties can be spaced 5-6 feet apart.

Camellias do not tolerate being planted too deep. When planting, the “plant them high and they won’t die” adage fits very well. The rootball should be 1- 2 inches higher than the surrounding soil after planting. Late fall through mid- winter is the best time to plant camellias for two reasons. First, they may still be in bloom so you can select the variety you like based on the flowers. Second, they will have time to become established before the heat of summer. An organic, fine pine bark, oak leaf, or pine straw mulch will help keep the soil under the plant cool and moist while adding organic matter as it decomposes. When adding mulch keep it away from the base of the plant to prevent basal rot.

Camellia fertilization usually includes 1-3 applications of fertilizer a year. If they are established and planted in the ground an “acid forming” fertilizer typically labeled for azaleas and camellias can be used. A fertilizer containing equal percentages of nitrogen and potassium (first and third numbers on the bag) and little or no phosphorus is best used in early spring, and early summer. In early fall a third application with little or no nitrogen can be applied.

Camellias do not need regular pruning. Allowing them to grow to their natural form is best. As they mature, thin out some of the interior of the canopy using selective reduction cuts to allow for adequate air circulation and allow a little light to reach the interior of the plant. This will prevent a common problem in mature camellias which is dieback in the canopy of older plants.

For more information on camellias including recommended varieties, go to “Camellias at a Glance” at <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/EP002>.

<https://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu/duval/> email duval@ifas.ufl.edu phone (904) 255-7450