

## Camellias Are Blooming

By Susan Camp

Before our first brief snowstorm in January, I noticed that our camellia shrubs were covered with buds. After the second heavier snow in February, I discovered that many buds had frozen and dropped to the ground. “Well, that’s it,” I thought, “no camellia show this year.” Last week, I discovered that new buds had appeared and opened and are offering a dazzling display of red and pink blossoms.

I had forgotten that all species of camellia tend to drop buds because the plants set more buds than they can open. A sudden cold spell, drought, and overwatering can cause bud drop, so it pays to be aware of water and temperature conditions if sudden bud drop occurs.

Camellias are slow-growing broadleaf evergreen shrubs or small trees, native to eastern Asia and India, but cultivated in the southern United States since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. As many as 250 species may exist, with more than 2000 cultivars registered by the American Camellia Society. In our region, *Camellia japonica* and *Camellia sasanqua* are the most frequently planted species.

*Camellia japonica* is the larger of the two popular species, potentially growing to a height of 25 feet or taller if left unpruned. It has a spread of 10 feet, with an upright growth habit and leathery, dark-green 4-inch leaves. The white, pink, or red flowers are 3 to 5 inches in diameter and are classified as single, semi-double, double, formal double, or full peony form, according to Clemson University Extension Publication HGIC 1062 “Camellia.” *Camellia japonica* blooms from late winter to early spring. It is unlikely to survive winter temperatures below 0 °F. Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 2901-1051 provides basic information on *Camellia japonica*.

Fall-blooming *Camellia sasanqua* is more winter hardy than *Camellia japonica*. *Camellia sasanqua* can reach a height of 1 ½ to 12 feet, either upright or spreading and bushy. The dark green leaves are 2 inches long, and the fragrant single or semi-double flowers are 2 to 3 inches in diameter. Flower colors are white, red, pink, lavender, or purple.

All species of camellia have similar planting and care requirements. They need well-drained sandy loam with a pH of 5.5 to 6.8 in a shady spot with protection from winter winds. A soil test will tell you if you need to amend the soil. Drainage and fertility can be improved with the addition of leaf mold, sawdust, aged cow manure, or other organic material.

Plant camellias between late fall and early spring. Mulch with no more than 4 inches of straw or other organic material, and water well after planting. Camellia roots are shallow, so water new plants deeply every week, especially during dry weather and when they are flowering.

Fertilize three times between March and September with moderate amounts of slow-release fertilizer for acid-loving plants, according to the American Camellia Society website, which

offers extensive, detailed information on planting, pruning, and caring for camellias. Use higher nitrogen (N) fertilizer in the spring; moderate nitrogen and phosphate (P) in summer; and higher potassium (K) in the fall. Avoid overfertilizing, which can cause burnt leaf edges and leaf drop.

Sunburn and dehydration from winter winds can cause leaf scorch and yellowing. Interveinal chlorosis presents as yellow leaves with green veins and results from planting in neutral or alkaline soil. Treat chlorotic plants with chelated iron and amend the soil to lower the pH.

Pests that affect camellias include tea scale, tiny insects that secrete honeydew, which serves as a medium for sooty mold, causing leaves to turn yellow and drop. Tea scale can be treated with horticultural oil. Camellia petal blight is a fungal disease that causes flowers to turn brown, and camellia leaf gall, also caused by a fungus, results in leaf distortion and drop. Fallen blossoms and leaf litter should be burned.

Once they are established with tender loving care, camellias can provide many years of beautiful flowers and rich foliage during the fall and winter months.