

Tony Glover

Question: I have had a camellia near my home for many years and it has never bloomed. It does produce plenty of bloom buds but they never open. Do you have any idea why this happens?

Answer: The disorder you have described is commonly called “bull nose” and the exact cause is not known. In general this disorder is thought to be either an environmental or genetic problem. The environmental issues that could cause this could be as simple as a light problem. Camellias bloom best when they get about three hours of intense morning light followed by filtered light and late afternoon shade. In deep shade the foliage may do fine but they may never bloom well.

Other environmental concerns may be excessive fertility (especially too much nitrogen) and alkaline soils. Normally we don't have alkaline soils but it is possible, especially near houses that have mortar or brick work. If you fertilize with nitrogen you may want to quit for a couple years (near the plant root system) and see what happens.

The natural soil for camellias contains humus or well-decomposed organic matter, is slightly acid, and is highly retentive of moisture but drains well. In camellia culture, the value of organic matter cannot be overemphasized, since it improves aeration and drainage and adds moderately to soil acidity.

Pruning at the wrong time can be a problem. Camellias require only light pruning, if any, to remove dead wood, to shape into compact plants, and to thin inside limbs to increase air movement. Do not shear plants or make multiple heading back cuts. The best time to prune is after blooming and before new flower and vegetative buds form. We primarily grow two types in our area. Camellia sasanqua, which bloom in the fall, should be pruned in late winter. For the brave souls who grow Camellia japonica you should prune them in late winter or spring just after blooming is completed.

If the problem is genetic in nature that simply means it does not have the capacity to bloom in our climate or your specific microclimate no matter what you do. In that case you should enjoy the other fine qualities of the plant or remove and replace with another camellia cultivar or a completely different plant.