



Bethany A. O'Rear
Regional Extension Agent
News Release

Camellia Culture

Q. I recently received a wonderful gift from a very thoughtful family member – a beautiful camellia. My grandmother had several specimen camellias around her home. Some of my fondest memories are of the brilliant flower displays that I would get to enjoy on my visits there. Unfortunately, I did not inherit her “green thumb,” and while I have always loved this plant from afar, I know absolutely nothing about the care and maintenance that is required. Can you help?

A. What a great gift – and one that you can enjoy now and for many years to come! Gardeners today are rediscovering the camellia as an easy to grow evergreen flowering shrub with many uses, incredible ruggedness and great beauty.

The camellia is native to an area encompassing Southeast Asia, China, Japan and various islands and countries from Vietnam to Burma. Camellias vary in color, size and form depending on the season, site, soil, nutrition of the plant and the aerial environment.

Location, location, location - some camellias can be grown in full sun, although most grow and produce better flowers in partial shade where the blooms and foliage are protected from sunburn. However, camellias in dense shade often become spindly and produce fewer blooms. A site under pine trees is ideal because pines provide filtered light year-round for growth, winter protection and natural mulch from the pine needles. Do not plant camellias where hardwood shade trees with shallow root systems will compete with the camellias for nutrients and water. Avoid windy, exposed sites since wind can be detrimental for camellias in winter and summer.

The best time to plant camellias is early fall or winter, when temperatures are above freezing. However, container-grown plants can be transplanted or repotted at any time of the year. Planting and transplanting both require meticulous care depending on the size and age of the plant. If possible, prepare the site and soil several weeks before planting. Most camellia enthusiasts recommend digging a hole in sandy and loamy soils twice the diameter and as deep as 1 ½ times the height of the plant's root ball. In clay soil, the planting hole should be even larger. Build a mound of one part soil and one part fine pine bark mixed in the bottom center of the hole. Place the plant on the mound and fill with your planting mix halfway to the top of the root ball. Soak thoroughly and finish the hole with soil mix, water again and mulch the watered surface of the soil with 2 to 4 inches of pine straw, pine bark or leaves. Mulch is very important

in that it helps to hold moisture, reduce surface evaporation, keep the soil cooler and suppress weeds. The root ball of the plant should be at least 1 inch above the surrounding ground level since the camellia will settle with subsequent watering and rainfall. One point to mention - container-grown plants are sometimes root-bound. This problem can be corrected by cutting the root ball open with a knife in three or four places, so the new roots will grow into the planting mix. Do not overwater in any soil type. Also, plant spacing depends on the natural habit and form of the camellia variety – 6 to 8 feet apart should be adequate for most varieties.

Camellias are not generally fertilized the first year after planting, especially if the soil is high in organic matter. After the first year, apply fertilizer in the spring, after blooming but before new growth starts. With many fertilizers, small amounts at frequent intervals are better than heavy applications. Special camellia fertilizers as well as 8-8-8, 10-6-4, cottonseed meal or cow manure are available at your local garden center. Some fertilizers have up to 70 percent of the nitrogen in a slow-release form, which is less likely to burn the roots. One application in early spring after blooming should be followed by a second application in mid-June to early July. Do not fertilize after July, so the plants will have a longer time to harden off and avoid freeze damage. A soil test is the best way to determine the nutrient status of the soil. In the absence of a soil test, a rule of thumb is to apply ½ to 1 pound of a 10-6-4 or similar analysis fertilizer per 100 square feet of plant bed area. Scatter the fertilizer evenly on top of the mulch and away from the main stem of the plant. For small plants (12 inches or smaller), 1 teaspoon per plant is adequate. Be sure to water fertilizer into the soil.

Camellias require only light pruning, if any, to remove dead wood, to shape slightly and to thin inside limbs to increase air movement. The best time to prune is after blooming and before new flower and vegetative buds form.

If you would like to see a snapshot of your future camellia-growing success, I know just the event for you –The Birmingham Camellia Society’s 62nd Annual Camellia Show. This free event will be held at the Birmingham Botanical Gardens, and will begin on Saturday, February 11th, and will conclude on Sunday, February 12th. Over 1,000 blooms will fill the tables of the Botanical Center Auditorium. Colors include red, white, pink, blush, variegated and the elusive yellow camellia. Blooms range in size from two-inch miniatures to giants larger than a lunch plate. This year “Birmingham Heritage Camellias” will be featured. These lovely camellia varieties, over two dozen in number, were developed in the Birmingham area by local growers. For further information about the show, contact Bill Dodson at 205.879.2596 or wdodson4311@charter.net. For more information about camellias please contact Bethany O’Rear, Regional Extension Agent-Home Grounds, Gardens and Home Pests at the St. Clair County Extension Office at (205) 338-9416 or email ba0004@aces.edu. Happy Gardening!