



# NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

## Camellias' Colors Come Alive in Winter (January 25, 2025)

By Michelle Le Strange, UC Master Gardener Advisor, Emeritus

Just when you think you can't take another gray day outside, along come camellias. You can find different varieties of camellia that bloom at slightly different times, giving you showy flowers from late October through March.

There are three major species: *Camellia japonica*, *C. reticulata*, and *C. sasanqua*. Briefly described, *C. japonica* is what most people automatically think of as a camellia, and in Tulare & Kings Counties, they require afternoon shade to perform well because of our heat. *C. reticulata* has "spectacularly" large flowers, but because they bloom on tall, lanky, ungraceful plants, they are not a favorite for the average garden. On the other hand, *C. sasanquas* are very useful in the garden since they can be planted in full sun (although a little afternoon shade helps prevent sunburn on the leaves). *C. sasanquas* are also the early bloomers of the camellia season, beginning in autumn and finishing in winter when the *C. japonicas* take center stage.

Six flower forms are recognized by the American Camellia Society: single, semi-double, formal double, peony form, anemone form, and rose form. Colors include various shades of red, pink, and white, and some are even striped like peppermint candy. Individual blooms range from 2-5 inches across and are quite showy. Single and semi-double forms have a conspicuous cluster of yellow-gold stamens in the flower center, adding striking contrast.



Camellias are versatile, quite easy to grow, and perform surprisingly well in our San Joaquin Valley climate. The japonicas perform better when just a few simple guidelines are followed. Plant them on the north side of the house or under the shade of tall trees and cover their roots with a 3" thick layer of bark mulch to keep soil cooler in hot summer months. In winter, they can take our gray days and wet soils.

Now is the time to shop for camellias in nurseries because they are in bloom, and you can easily decide which variety you like. Choose an area in your garden and dedicate it to other acidic-loving plants like azaleas, gardenias, and hydrangeas. Because our soils typically range in pH from 6.5 to 7.5 (and even higher in some salty alkaline areas), we need to spend time preparing our soil before planting camellias. But that is the extent of the fuss. Thoroughly mix in amendments like peat moss (gypsum, if your soil is alkaline and salty) and compost, then plant the plants slightly high so water drains away from the trunk. Be sure the area drains water fast, as these plants do not like to be soggy.

My backyard faces north, and I created a flower bed along the stucco side of my house. Fifteen years ago, I planted three different varieties of pink camellia bushes fairly close to the house: 5 magenta and pink azaleas in front of the camellias and three clumps of alstroemeria (also in shades of pink to hot pink) in front along a pathway. A red-leaf Japanese maple provides the focal point. This area blooms in the sequence they were planted and is always very pleasing to the eye. Once it was established, it required less water than I originally thought, and it required very little maintenance to keep it looking nice.

Camellia petal blight is one disease that occasionally causes trouble. Flower petals rapidly turn ugly brown. It is caused by excess moisture at bloom that requires some attention, or it can get out of hand. If the disease appears, just pick up the spent blooms and throw them away rather than let them sit on the soil. These are loaded with spores, and splashing water just spreads the spores around. In severe cases, it is best to change out the mulch, too.

Scorched or yellow areas in leaf centers usually mean sunburn, while chlorosis of leaves (yellow leaves with green veins) is an indication that the plant roots can't access enough iron. Fertilize a few times with a commercial acid plant food in the weeks and months following bloom. Pruning is easy. Just prune to shape and pinch back to keep it bushy.

Chase away the blues of the dull gray days by cutting some colorful camellia blooms from bushes with a few glossy leaves attached. Bring them inside to float in a glass bowl, and you'll be pleased with the comments they inspire.

### Questions? Call the Master Gardeners:

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