

Why Grow Camellias in Your Garden?

By Sharon Lee

There are many reasons to have a camellia or two—or many—in your garden. Three of the most compelling reasons are: camellias are reliable landscape plants; they are blooming evergreens that can produce exquisite flowers; and, best of all, they are easy to care for. Many camellias bloom in fall and winter and provide colorful flowers when other garden treasures may not be in bloom. Because of this feature, camellias are often called the “queens” or “roses” of winter gardens because their elegant, rose-like blooms appear in cool weather. Below are some characteristics and growing condition hints to help you decide if a camellia will thrive in your garden.

Growth Habits

- Most camellias grow in shade or part shade—though some varieties prefer sun.
- Because of their shallow, non-invasive root systems, these flowering shrubs are ideal as foundation plants and they can also be planted in pots.
- Camellias produce rich, dark green foliage year-round, with upright, bushy, or sprawling growth. Some varieties can even be used to create a hedge.
- Plants grow slowly—six to twelve inches a year—so require only minor pruning (which should be done after blooming).
- Depending on variety, camellias can begin blooming in September and finish in April/May. The growing season is



Photo: Jean Pawek

Camellias make a beautiful and effective hedge.



Photo: Sharon Lee

Camellia japonica v. ‘Valentine Day’.



Photo: UCANR

Camellia blight UCANR – An example of camellia petal blight caused by a fungus. To prevent petal blight, remove infected flowers, pick up fallen blossoms, and dispose of the litter in the trash.

generally March through September, with bud set starting late July. Plants are dormant in winter when blooming.

- Bloom *color* includes many shades of red, pink, coral, variegated, white, or even yellow. Bloom *size* ranges from less than two inches to as large as six inches. Bloom *form* may be single, semi-double, formal double, anemone, peony, or rose.

Care and Maintenance

Regular, consistent watering is needed if planted in the ground. Plants will require less water as they mature.

Fertilize as little as three times a year: St. Patrick’s Day, Memorial Day, and July Fourth. Most camellia aficionados recommend cottonseed meal and iron. Camellias are “low feeders,” so take care not to over fertilize with commercial mixes.

Camellias do *not* like to have their crowns covered with soil or mulch so, when planting in an acid planting mix, the plant crown (root ball) should be placed an inch or so above soil level.

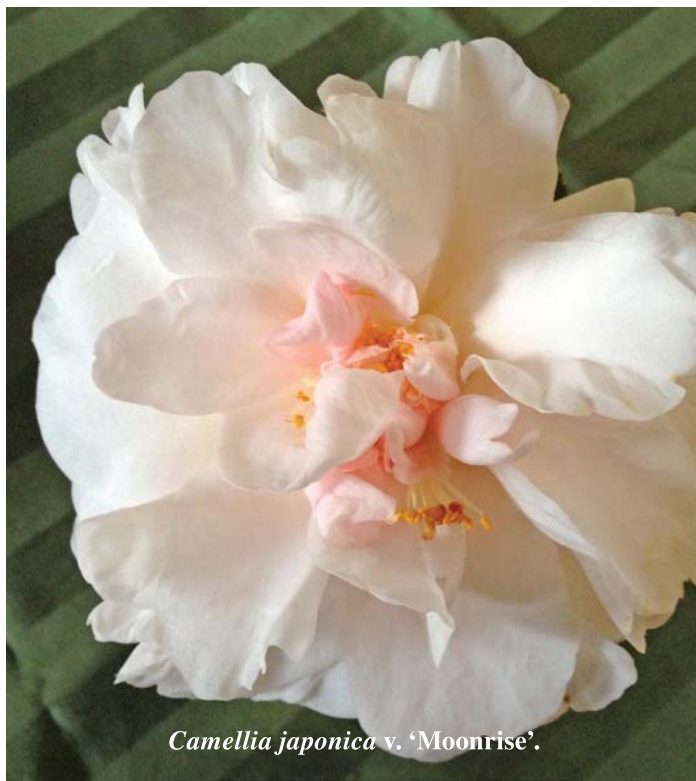
The most common disease is petal blight, best prevented by removing infected flowers and disposing of blooms that fall to the ground. Most other pests and diseases are minor.

Photo: Sharon Lee



Camellia japonica v. 'Fiesta Grande variegated'.

Photo: Sharon Lee



Camellia japonica v. 'Moonrise'.

Photo: Sharon Lee



Camellia reticulata v. 'Mouchang'.

Plant Selections

The American Camellia Society estimates that there are over 250 species and 33,000 varieties of camellias, so your choice of plants is almost unlimited. Here are the most popular species for the garden, which can be found readily in local, large, and specialty nurseries: *Camellia* (*C.*) *japonica*; *C. sasanqua*; *C. hiemalis*; *C. vernalis*; *C. reticulata*; and *C. sinensis* (the tea camellia).

Camellia japonica thrives mostly in part shade (sun before 10 a.m. and after 3 p.m.) or in dappled shade all day. Two varieties that tolerate full sun are 'Covina', a rose red, small, semi-double to rose form double and 'Ace of Hearts', a red, medium to large, semi-double to rose form. Several part-shade varieties that thrive in San Diego are: 'Kramer's Supreme', a red to light red, large peony form; 'Silver Waves', a very large white, semi-double form with wavy petals; 'Marie Bracey' (aka 'Splendor'), a coral rose, large semi-double to loose peony form; 'Nuccio's Jewel', a medium loose to full peony form, white edged with coral pink; and, last, a very old and reliable variety, 'Debutante', a light pink, full peony form.

'Sun' camellias include hybrids of *C. sasanqua*, *C. hiemalis*, and *C. vernalis*. Even though they are referred to as 'sun' camellias, they also grow beautifully in shade or part shade. The sun camellias are heavy, profuse bloomers, which begin blooming in autumn and can bloom through December and January. One very hardy and popular *C. sasanqua* variety is 'Yuletide', so named for its red blooms that perform through the holidays. Another exquisite white variety, 'Setsugekka', is a fast, open grower with large, semi-double ruffled petals. The *C. hiemalis* variety, 'Kanjiro', is an extremely vigorous grower with rose pink flowers. Finally, the *C. vernalis* variety, 'Egao', has large, show quality, pink flowers whose name means 'smiling faces'.

Fragrance! While there are several wonderfully fragrant camellias, the most frequent winner and the most readily available is *C. lutchuensis* 'High Fragrance'. Its fragrance is similar to Easter hyacinth and permeates the profuse blooms, which are a medium, peony form, pale ivory pink with deep pink edges.

With so many species and varieties to choose from, perhaps now is the time to say "yes" to planting one or more camellias in your garden.

For questions on home gardening, contact the UCCE Master Gardeners of San Diego County Hotline at (858) 822-6910 or by email: help@mastergardenerssandiego.org.

Photo: Sharon Lee



Camellia japonica v. 'Frank Houser variegated'.