

### **Camellias: a grace note for autumn**

Perhaps it was the shock of early October's sudden temperature shift from the 80s to the 50s but the large quiet camellia shrub burst into a flurry of raspberry pink almost overnight. Fall colors have become a cliché: fall means golds, reds, and browns. Raspberry, even white seems an anomaly. However camellias are fall bloomers and they come in a pink palette!

If I kept proper notes I could say for certain the camellias that bloom in early October have never been so early. I don't trust the memory that suggests the cloud of chrysanthemums fade as the camellias bloom. This is the first year I have seen daylilies and rhododendrons bloom in October but I may not have noticed them before. My friend reports her pear trees in spring bloom right now! Will we lose the charm of the unexpected because nothing IS unexpected anymore?

Some gardeners possess the right woodland setting for camellias and have acquired species that bloom from October to March. They come in white and white streaked or edged in rose reds. They are crimson with a golden boss of stamens and the blooms vary from single to doubles, flat faced with every petal in proper formation, or in a shaggy tumble of petals. Centuries of breeding have resulted in forms that are as diverse as they are perfect.

Native to Northern India, the Himalayas, China, Japan, Indonesia, Java and Sumatra, they have made themselves treasures in gardens worldwide. Most of the plants we see are either *C. japonica* or *C. sasanqua* but the interbreeding has resulted in a broad range of flower color, size, and bloom time. In a nod to fall colors there is *C. nitidissima*, aka *C. chrysantha*, in butter yellow.

The plant encyclopedia gives "before January 1" as the bloom time for early camellias but we can usually manage a fall bouquet of late roses and early camellias. They prefer a sheltered location as cold winter winds damage the flowers. They do well in dappled shade although *C. sasanqua* will prosper in full sun once it is established.

*C. japonica*, also referred to as common camellia, is an upright and spreading evergreen shrub or small tree with broadly elliptic, glossy dark green leaves about 2-3 inches long. These species flower in winter and early spring with some cultivars of the species flowering mid to late spring. Efforts are underway to breed fragrant camellias. One species, *C. lutchuensis* has scented single white flowers ½ inch across in midseason. *C. nitidissima* and *C. oleifera* also have scented flowers but they are not as hardy as *C. japonica*. *C. reticulata* is a large shrub/small tree with larger leathery leaves with spring blooming single red flowers for zone 8 and south.

*C. sasanqua* is also sensitive to cold but grows well here in zone 7-8 and will tolerate our summers. A familiar *C. sasanqua* is 'Yuletide' with dense foliage and a profusion of single red flowers with bright yellow stamens. It may bloom in its appointed time or it may bloom for Thanksgiving. It needs to be planted in a sheltered spot with excellent drainage as it may not survive wet feet. All camellias should be planted with the root ball no deeper than surrounding soil or slightly above.

Camellias stay fairly small for years then suddenly have a growth spurt so you have to check their mature size unless you enjoy shuffling large shrubs around your garden. Nor do they look their best when sheared off at the level of your dining room windows. Once upon a time there was a large camellia planted in front of Page School and trimmed similarly to the neighboring privet. An occasional red flower could be seen hiding in the back of the shrub, but no amount of protest could change habits.

Because they are well shaped camellias do not require pruning unless you want to keep the flowers within reach. They do tolerate hard pruning but generally you need only to cut back the wayward shoots that spoil the symmetry. You can also deadhead the flowers but it is not essential as most camellia blooms drop neatly off. It is probably a good idea to gather them up if you are concerned about mold or fungus.

They can be lightly fertilized in spring with a balanced fertilizer but compost will serve as well as a commercial product. Shredded bark or leaf mold spread to a depth of about two inches will give the planting a finished look and deter sprouting weeds.