



ASK A MASTER GARDENER

CAMILLIAS

By Gay Wilhelm, Placer County Master Gardener

Q I'm seeing camellias in the nursery. I'm not sure if they are easy to grow or what kind of conditions they need. Can you help?

A The two most common camellias in our area are *Camellia japonica* and *Camellia susanqua*. The *susanqua* variety is more spreading and vine-like than the *japonica* variety. It also blooms earlier, autumn to early winter. *Susanqua* camellias also tolerate more sun. *Japonica* varieties are sturdy shrubs that can reach 20 feet in height and as well in width. They do bloom later than the *susanqua* camellias, but bloom can be early (Oct.-Jan), midseason (Jan.-March) or late (March-May).

Camellias do best when planted under high arching trees that provide filtered shade as well as protection from our cold winters and hot summers. Or place them near warm south-facing walls where they are sheltered from cold winds. Avoid full sun exposures.

Plant growth is greatest in spring, so fertilize after the last frost. Scatter low nitrogen (2-10-10) acid camellia fertilizer over the entire root zone. Or apply 8-16 oz of cottonseed meal per plant. Repeat every other month until August.

Be sure to pick up fallen flowers and petals. This will help prevent a common fungal disease called camellia petal blight that turns petals brown and causes blossoms to drop prematurely. As with all fungal diseases, petal blight is promoted by rainy weather. After flowering, place a 4 inch fresh layer of organic mulch over existing mulch to reduce spore survival. (Fungi are spread by spores.) And do not compost camellia flowers that are diseased; instead, dispose of them in the trash to prevent the spores from spreading.

Camellias like regular water but can also survive on very little moisture after the first year in the right soil conditions. Well-drained soil rich in organic matter is extremely important for a healthy shrub.

Plants are usually not permanently damaged by frost, but the degree of cold injury is influenced by the duration and frequency of the frost. Covering plants at night when a frost is due will be helpful to young plants—but be sure to remove covers during the day. Provide soil with adequate moisture to increase its ability to retain heat.

Choose container grown shrubs now while the plants are in bloom. With over 3,000 different named cultivars, the range of colors and size of flowers is amazing. The blooms will reward you year after year with very little work.

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