

CAMELLIAS

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Camellias are surprisingly drought tolerant in maturity. Their bold leaves lend a rich green, often glossy texture to the Asian or woodland garden. The International Camellia Society lists seven distinct flower forms: single form, semi-double form, anemone form, peony form, rose form double, formal double, and Higo (generally single form, but occasionally with small petaloids.)

Minimally, most Camellias want to be 6 to 12 feet tall and wide shrubs or small trees. I don't think they look happy in less than six-by-six feet of ground space, planted at least three to four feet, preferably six to eight feet, on center from any structure. In Southern California gardens, Camellias grow slowly. They are relatively long-lived in the right conditions. Planted in California, in about a century they can be 20 feet tall! However, it would take several years before one outgrew a six-by-six-foot garden space.

Camellias can be kept somewhat smaller with artistic pruning. That is, with hand held pruning shears, snip each branch back to a node, to desired size and shape. Pruning in winter, just after bloom will preserve flowering buds. Camellias bloom on spring growth. Hedge-clipping Camellias results in awkward slicing of leaves and if done after spring growth, results in few, if any, flowers the next season. Leaving Camellias to grow into their natural form retains the characteristic arching branch structure. If watered enough to establish, it also ensures the plants will provide their own surface feeder roots a sufficient shade canopy, and they'll become quite drought tolerant large shrubs as they age.

To plant Camellias in areas where soil is alkaline and/or heavy clay, native soil should be replaced to a depth of about 18 inches with a 50/50 mix of good topsoil and peat moss, or one of the Camellia/Azalea potting soils available at nurseries and garden centers. A layer of a few inches of gravel underneath the new soil aids in leaching out salts in water. This will help your Camellias stay healthy. Healthy plants require less fertilizer and are less attractive to pests.

Camellias may be planted in containers. However, they don't take kindly to a lot of salt building up in the potting soil. If contained, they may need to be provided fresh soil every few years. Having delicate roots, repotting Camellias is a risky process.

Fertilize Camellias with an acid fertilizer as needed. I prefer to use organic fertilizers, such as those containing cottonseed meal and blood meal. Unlike chemical fertilizers, organics are beneficial for soil and garden health, and they are generally mild. You can use organics without much worry of burning foliage.

Litter and weeds under Camellias are best removed by hand to avoid disturbing surface feeder roots. Or, use a rubber-tined rake with a light stroke. Mulching with up to 4 or 5 inches of fine, light organic material will keep weeds down and reduce irrigation needs. Keep mulch away from the plant's crown. Fastidious clean up of litter helps to control Camellia flowers' number one enemy, camellia petal blight. If blight occurs, remove all affected flowers on and off plants, and remove and replace mulch. Do not place these materials on your compost pile.

Enjoy Camellia flowers floating in a shallow bowl. Or, cut a longer stem and use in arrangements.



begarden.com

Camellia japonica is most commonly found in California gardens. However, Camellias are quite versatile and varied in form. Camellia sinensis leaves are harvested commercially to make black, white and green tea. Camellia sasanqua are generally more compact than Camellia japonica. Some C. sasanqua have a vine-like habit. They can be effectively espaliered against a trellis in an entrance court or narrow side garden. Somewhat less showy than C. japonica, C. sasanqua flowers more heavily. It is not valued as a cut flower, but deserves consideration in the garden.

For more information about Camellias check out these websites:

<http://www.camellias-accs.com/> -- American Camellia Society

<http://camellia-ics.org/> -- The International Camellia Society

http://camellia-ics.org/_ics/flowerforms.htm -- flower forms defined by ICS

http://www.monrovia.com/about_us/press_room/article.php?id=22 -- Monrovia Nursery Company – distinct Camellia Nursery, Visalia, CA

<http://www.nucciosnurseries.com/> -- Camellia and Azalea grower in Altadena, CA

<http://www.descansogardens.org/site/camelliaforest.cfm> -- Descanso Gardens, La Canada Flintridge, CA

<http://www.sunset.com/> -- Sunset Magazine

Other resource:

Sunset Western Garden Book, edited by Kathleen Norris Brenzel, Sunset Publishing, 2007