

Pensacola News Journal
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A Shrub for Winter Color

There are only a few kinds of woody shrubs that bloom during the fall and winter, but there is a species of Camellia that does. The Camellia sasanqua varieties begin flowering as early as October and continue through the fall.

“Sasanquas,” as they are called in the nursery trade, are unfortunately not as well known as the more popular Camellia japonica varieties. In addition to an unusual flowering season, sasanquas have another outstanding characteristic. They are the most cold hardy species of Camellia. In fact, many growers of japonicas prefer plants that have been grafted onto sasanqua rootstock, which imparts cold resistance.

Sasanqua camellias are available in a range of colors, including white and pink. Standard varieties grow to become large shrubs up to 10 feet or more in height and 6 feet in width. There are now dwarf varieties that are somewhat shorter and have a more compact habit of growth.

“Setsugekka” is a large, upright growing sasanqua with white flowers. “Jean May” is a cultivar with a slow rate of growth and large double flowers that are shell pink in color. “Daydream” has white flowers that are edged rose pink. “Grandiflora Alba” has an upright, compact growth habit and very large, single white flowers. There are possibly other cultivars being offered that are worthy of trial.

These broadleaved evergreen shrubs can be used in several ways in the landscape. They are well adapted for hedges or screens, in mass plantings, as foundation plants for large houses and as freestanding specimens.

Sasanqua Camellia Growing Tips

✍ All camellias perform best in partially shaded locations. Also choose planting sites that provide good water drainage and air movement. Camellias will not grow in wet areas, so do not plant where there is a high water table or a hardpan.

✍ Shop local nurseries and garden centers for healthy container grown plants.

✍ When installing mass plantings and using soil amendments, the entire bed should be prepared, rather than individual planting holes. Begin by spading or tilling the entire bed to a depth of 8 to 12 inches. If organic amendments are used, mix 3 to 6 inches of organic matter into the top 6 to 12 inches of soil. A complete fertilizer and micronutrients can be added as needed during bed preparation.

✍ Camellias require soil that is somewhat acid. Fortunately most of our local soils are acid by nature and little or no pH adjustment is required. Avoid planting sites where the soil pH has been previously altered. Such areas include: around the base of masonry walls, where building debris was buried or burned and in areas where seashells were used for driveways or walks.

✍ Dig each planting hole 2 to 3 times the diameter of the root ball, and no deeper than the height of the root ball. Disturbing the soil beneath the plant may cause it to settle too deeply, and deep planting can seriously damage or kill a camellia.

✍ Maintain a mulched area beneath plants, using coarse, organic materials such as pine needles or bark.

✍ Water thoroughly to settle the soil around new transplants, and water frequently until they are well established.

✍ Light, frequent applications of fertilizer during the growing season are preferable to fewer, heavy applications. Use an acid forming complete fertilizer such as an "Azalea - Camellia Special."

Note to Camellia lovers: Our area is fortunate to have an active group known as the Pensacola Camellia Club. They meet every third Tuesday, except June and July, at 7:00 p.m. in building 3 at the Pensacola Junior College main campus. Also, attend the annual Camellia Show being held at the Wright Place, Pensacola on December 9 and 10. On Saturday the show begins at 1:00 p.m. and ends at 5:00 p.m. and on Sunday show time is from noon until 5:00 p.m.

Anyone who is interested in growing Camellias along the northern Gulf Coast should consider attending the show and monthly meetings. Club members love to share information about these winter flowering shrubs.

Question of the Week: Is it too late to fertilize my centipede lawn?

Answer: Our current recommendations call for no applications using a complete fertilizer after September on centipedegrass in North Florida. Research is underway that might eventually show benefits of a later application of potassium, but I have no official word yet. Should you decide to fertilize anyway, use a product that is low in nitrogen and relatively high in potassium.