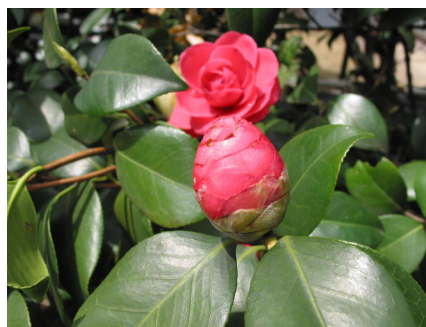


## Camellias

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**Introduction:** Camellias are large, attractive, broad-leaved, evergreen shrubs or small trees from 3 to 20 feet tall that are highly prized for their flowers, which bloom from winter to spring. They are native to eastern and southern Asia. *Camellia japonica* (Japanese or common camellia) and *C. sasanqua* (sasanqua camellia) are the most widely used landscape species in Southern California, although other species and hybrids are available. The species *Camellia sinensis* is the plant whose leaves and buds are used to produce tea.

**History:** Some Japanese camellias, around the emperor's palace in Japan, are known to be more than 500 years old. The camellia arrived in Europe from the Orient during the 17th century, where it had been grown for centuries. It reached in the western world during the 1800s, when the entire European continent fell in love with it. The plant with its lush blossoms and satiny deep green leaves was celebrated in art and literature during Queen Victoria's reign, and was grown in quantities by the great nurseries of England, France, Belgium and Italy. The camellia came to America early in the 1800s. Soon, the popular ornamental varieties of Europe were imported and spread rapidly through the conservatories of the Northeast and Southern plantation gardens of Charleston, Mobile, Savannah and New Orleans. The blossom's beauty spread all the way to the West Coast before the Civil War.

The war and Reconstruction took their toll on many rare shrubs, and camellias were possibly just forgotten until the turn of the twentieth century. The American Camellia Society have put camellias that were introduced before World War I in the category called Antique. These plants can still be found in Southern plantations such as Middleton Gardens in Charleston. In fact, you can grow an authentic living antique, as each camellia carries the same DNA as the original plant!

Camellias and camellia collecting increased in popularity during the 1950s. The American Camellia Society, founded in 1945, still thrives today in its promotion of the genus. Local, state and regional camellia organizations sprang up during the mid-1950s. The camellia industry could barely keep up with the demand, and the camellia shows became very popular in the winter months.



**Varieties:** There are more than 2,300 named cultivars registered with the American Camellia Society. The primary camellias used include cultivars of Japanese camellia (*Camellia japonica*), Sasanqua camellia (*C. sasanqua*), tea-oil camellia (*C. oleifera*), other species (*C. sinensis* or tea camellia) and many hybrids using two other species extensively (*C. reticulata* and *C. salvenensis*). New varieties in great number were produced during the 1950's, but the boom had its downside – many good garden varieties were overlooked in favor of the “show flower”. Evaluation of hundreds of “found” varieties of the decade (1950 to 1959) are resurfacing, many of which could worthy garden subjects.

Common Japanese Camellia (*Camellia japonica*) is a broadleaved, evergreen shrub, which may grow to a height of 25 feet, but more often to 6 to 12 feet. It has a spread of 6 to 10 feet. The dark-green leathery leaves are 4 inches long. The flowers, which range in color from white to pink and red, are 3 to 5 inches in diameter. They flower on different varieties from September until April. The flowers may be single, semi-double, or double.

*Camellia sasanqua* is a broad-leaved evergreen shrub, varying in form from upright and densely bushy to low and spreading. Heights range from 1 to 12 feet tall. The leaves are dark green, shiny and about 2 inches long. They are usually darker green and smaller than the leaves of *C. japonica* or *C. reticulata*. The flowers are mostly white and single, 2 to 3 inches in diameter, and very fragrant.

*Camellia oleifera* is a large shrub to 20 feet tall with glossy, dark green leaves and fragrant, 2-inch-wide flowers in fall.

*Camellia reticulata* has some of the biggest and most spectacular flowers, but is a rather gaunt and open shrub, about 10 feet tall and 8 feet wide. This species is very susceptible to cold. Mild frost will kill the plant. *C. reticulata* hybridized with *C. japonica* or *C. salvenensis* results in excellent hybrids.

**Landscape Use and Planting:** Camellias are best planted while in bloom which is helpful because you can see what colors you are adding to your garden. Sasanqua camellias are in bloom in December. Although the *Camellia sasanqua* flowers are smaller and not as long-lasting as the *Camellia japonica*, the plant blooms profusely and can take more sun. Camellias are used as specimen small trees or large shrubs, shrub borders and screens in protected locations. The main ornamental feature is their showy flowers.

Camellias need well-drained soil for establishment. Because camellias are slow-growers, they are slow to get established. Competition for water is the one critical thing in establishment. They thrive and bloom best when sheltered from full sun and drying winds. Older plants of some types of camellia plants can thrive in full sun when they are mature enough to have their roots shaded by a heavy canopy of leaves.



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Camellias can be planted any time of the year (preferably from mid-October to November and from mid-March to mid-April) provided they are properly planted and mulched and checked for water frequently. Camellias are shallow-rooted plants. It is recommended to dig a large, wide planting hole the same depth as the original root ball. This will provide an adequate volume of loose soil for root growth and keep the plant from settling too deeply. Remove stones and break up heavy clay soils, then back fill the hole with loose native soil.

**Fertilization:** Camellias perform best in neutral to slightly acid soil light applications of acid plant fertilizer when plants are in bloom may be used to maintain dark-green, attractive foliage. Follow the instructions on the fertilizer label. Burned leaf edges and excessive leaf drop usually indicate over fertilizing.

**Irrigation:** Use a 2- to 3-inch layer of mulch to conserve soil moisture. Camellias are more commonly damaged by over-watering than under-watering. Established plants can tolerate infrequent irrigation. Bud drop can be caused by water stress in the summer, but some flower bud dropping may be natural, as many camellias set more buds than they can support.

**Pruning:** Camellias require very little pruning except for the removal of damaged, dead or weak branches and long shoots that detract from the attractive form of the shrub can be done anytime. Cutting back severely (no leaves left) can be done safely from mid-February to the beginning of May. Prune immediately after plants bloom to minimize the effect on next year's flowering.

**Pest Management:** Camellias can be affected by aphids, armored scales, black vine weevils, fuller rose beetles, mealy bugs, soft scale and whitefly. Some of the diseases that can attack camellias are camellia blight, collar, foot and crown rot, leaf gall, and sooty mold. There are a couple of viruses that can affect the shrub as well such as; camellia variegation virus and yellow mottle virus. More information can be found on this subject in [Camellia pests](#).

