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PLANT CAMELLIAS NOW!

by Frank Ohrt

President, Coushatta Camellia Society

It's wintertime, and most flowers of summer are done. Don't despair. Winter is the season for camellias, loveliest flowers of all! Camellia sassanquas are beginning to bloom already. Japonicas and reticulatas are not far behind.

Most first questions about camellias are: "Where do I plant them, and when?" Perfect place: dappled sunlight under pine trees. But bright shade or morning sun are fine. Avoid hot afternoon sun. It will burn the leaves.

Not sure of a location? Put camellia there in a pot for a year. See how it does:

If leaves burn, it's getting too much sun.

If it has few flower buds, or none, it needs more light.

PLANTING:

- Now is a fine time to plant camellias, though most people wait until after they finish blooming.
- Don't wait too long. They should be well settled in before it gets hot outside.
- Plant camellia in a roomy hole with a good layer of soil with a high percentage of organic matter below and around it.
- The root ball top should be a couple of inches above surrounding bed.
- Pile soil up around it, mulch well, and you're set.



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DECEMBER CAMELLIA CARE

- Check camellias for tea scale, tiny white specks on leaf undersides. Spray with Neem oil or dormant oil. Cover leaf tops and bottoms.
- Bees visit camellia blooms. Systemic insecticides used now will get in blooms, killing bees. Be especially wary of neo-nicotinoids like “Safari,” which are effective but particularly toxic to bees.
- Consider “debudding” plants for better blooms. If there are more than one bud on the end of a twig, they will crowd each other and won’t open nicely.
- Pick one upward/outward-facing bud. Twist others off. You will have fewer flowers, but they will show their full beauty.
- An excessive number of buds can lead to “bullnosing” in some varieties. A bloom opens partially, then the center falls off. Pretty frustrating!

While camellias are freeze-hardy on the Gulf Coast, their flowers are not. Blooms and buds showing color can be burned in a frost. But green buds will survive just fine.

If a freeze is coming, cut any blooms that are open, or mostly open. Enjoy them inside. A lovely camellia in the morning is almost as good as coffee!