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While many plants are ending their growing season and preparing to go dormant, camellias are just beginning their season and are adding loads of color to the fall and winter landscape. . Camellias are a quintessential southern plant, and thrive in the heat and humidity of our summers, but plant breeders are also introducing more cold tolerant varieties and expanding the plant hardiness range.

While there are over 100 species of camellias that grow wild in Asia there are only three or four species commonly grown in the United States. The two most common camellia types grown in Arkansas are either the late fall to early winter blooming *Camellia sasanqua* or the late winter to early spring blooming *Camellia japonica*. There are now crosses with extensive variations in flower, leaf sizes and growth habits as well as cold tolerance. Where once camellias were relegated to mid Arkansas and areas further south, there are now cold hardy introductions which will survive even in NW Arkansas—all the way to St. Louis. ‘Winter’s Charm’, ‘Snow Flurry’, ‘Polar Ice’, ‘Winter’s Rose’ and ‘Winter’s Hope’ are all selections released by the National Arboretum and registered with the American Camellia Society which will survive winters that get as low as -12 F.

The cold tolerant varieties and the *C. sasanqua* camellias bloom in the fall through early winter. The leaves are smaller and the plants are more shrub-like than the *C. japonica*. Although the flowers may be smaller, the plants are usually covered with blooms for 4-8 weeks. The northern tier of our state is restricted to planting the new cold hardy crosses, but the rest of Arkansas can choose from all the available selections. The later blooming *C. japonica* varieties can grow into fairly large plants—10-15 feet tall or more. They produce the showiest blossoms, but they are also the ones most susceptible to winter damage. With proper plant choices, you can have camellias blooming from October through March.

Camellias do best in a rich, well drained, acidic soil. They prefer filtered sunlight or morning sun, but they won’t bloom well in heavy shade and can sunscald in full sun. They need ample moisture the first few years of establishment, but once established, they are actually fairly drought tolerant. If we have an extremely dry summer, they benefit from supplemental water, but if they get overly dry, they simply won’t set as many flower buds. Camellias are much tougher than azaleas, which are a common companion plant.

Camellia flowers range in shades of red, pink and white with loads of bi-color blends as well. The flower form can also vary tremendously by species with singles, semi-doubles, doubles, rose, peony and anemone forms.

Bud drop is a fairly common complaint with some varieties, but can occur on all types depending on the growing season. Because camellias bloom during the fall and winter months, they are susceptible to all the fluctuating temperatures we have in Arkansas. Freezing temperatures can cause buds to drop on the less cold hardy varieties, or when a freeze occurs when flowers are

opening or showing color. Long periods of hot, dry weather in the early fall can cause buds to drop off in late fall with some varieties.

Camellias are fairly easy to maintain once they get established. Fertilize using an acidic fertilizer once a year in the spring—after bloom is finished and all winter weather is over. That is also the time to do any needed pruning. If you have a reason to prune it is best to selectively prune out branches rather than shearing to achieve a more natural looking shrub.

Try to choose plants that will fit the mature size your landscape needs, and you won't have many pruning chores. Sasanqua varieties range from mature plants reaching 2-3 feet in height to 10-15 feet. One of the shortest varieties is 'Chansonette' which stays 2-3 feet in height but can spread 6 feet or more. 'Shishi Gashira' has a semi-double pink flower and has been common in the trade for years, growing to 4-5 feet in height, while 'Apple Blossom' with its single white flowers edged in pink has a more upright growth habit to 10 feet or more. 'Yuletide' is perfect for the holidays with its dark red single flower with bright yellow stamens, growing upright to 10 feet, and 'Bonanza' has a red double peony form flower with a more compact growth habit to 4-5 feet in height. 'White Doves' is a beautifully double flowered white form up to 5 feet in height.

Some showy *Camellia japonicas* include the large flowering 'R.L. Wheeler' with late large red flowers, 'Pink Perfection' with double pink flowers, 'Professor Sargent' with a full peony red flower, and 'Betty Sheffield' with mottled red and white flowers.

With so many different named camellias on the market, selections will vary from nursery to nursery. Read the tags, and find out the mature size and bloom period. Choose a mix of types and you can expand your bloom season. Plant camellias in the right place, and they can be an excellent addition to your garden for many years with relatively little care.