

HARDY CAMELLIAS FOR MONTHS OF SPECTACULAR BLOOM

Charles Cresson

DURING THE COOL SEASONS OF THE YEAR, when most blooms are small and scarce in the garden, no hardy shrub can match the flower power of camellias, boasting large blossoms against glossy evergreen foliage. Despite the camellia's longstanding reputation as a tender southern belle, modern hybrids provide a choice of hardy cultivars for autumn and spring bloom. Individual plants may flower for 2 or 3 months and a camellia garden planted with several varieties can easily provide luscious blooms for 5 or more months, even in our northern climate. Old plants, allowed to grow large, can achieve the stature of large shrubs or even small trees, producing thousands of blooms each year.

Camellias are adapted to flowering in seemingly inhospitable seasons when conditions can be cold, wet and even frosty. By setting many buds that they open in succession over a long period of time, they overcome these challenging conditions. If individual flowers are damaged by such inclement weather, another set of buds are waiting to replace them when conditions moderate. The individual blossoms of some varieties even have a surprising degree of frost tolerance. Since camellia flowers are heavily endowed with nectar, they are highly prized by honeybees, particularly in autumn.

For convenience, camellias can be divided in to 3 categories:

1. The spring blooming varieties begin as early as March and continue until late April or early May. Individual varieties have an earlier or later period of bloom, but the peak season is April. This is the classic camellia with many cultivars derived from *Camellia japonica* and its hybrids. Flowers may exceed 4 inches in diameter in colors ranging from pure white through shades of pink to dark red. Flower forms vary from single



Camellia japonica 'April Kiss' blooms peak in April.

Photo: Charles Cresson

through semi-double to the very decorative "formal double" with petals arranged in a neat pattern. The heavy substance of these blooms makes them ideal for cutting and floating in a decorative bowl in which they may last for several days.

2. The autumn varieties flower from mid-October to December or even January, depending upon weather patterns, with the heaviest

Fall blooming
Camellia × *vernalis*
'Shibori Egao'.
Photo: Melinda Zoehrer



bloom period occurring from mid October until Thanksgiving.

Derived mostly from *C. sasanqua* and hybrids, including *C. × verna-*

lis, these cultivars have smaller leaves and smaller flowers of thinner substance than their spring blooming brethren. When cut, they last only a day or so, particularly in a warm room. But out in the garden, their bloom is prolific and extended through a succession of flowers, often exceeding 2 months on a single plant. Colors range from white through shades of pink with a few red varieties, and single to double flower forms. They are also lightly scented, although the sweetness of the scent is tempered with musty, earthy overtones. While individual cultivars vary in their bloom periods, those that begin in early fall are most recommended for colder garden conditions, allowing them time to open most of their buds before the onset of more severe winter conditions. No camellia can be expected to continue blooming through the dead of winter outdoors in our region.

3. Tender or non-hardy species and hybrids require protection from severe frosts and bloom during the winter months. In recent years, scores of new camellia species have been discovered in the tropical and subtropical forests of southeastern Asia including Vietnam. They are excellent candidates for a cool sunroom or windowsill where temperatures range from 40-60°F. Many of these varieties will bloom for months with a succession of sweetly fragrant flowers. They can be summered outdoors to maximize bud set for the following winter and respond well to pruning in order to control size and improve their shape.

While isolated camellia specimens have been known to survive outdoors for years in the mid-Atlantic states, active breeding programs to develop reliably winter hardy cultivars began only 30 years ago after a series of devastatingly severe winters demonstrated the hardiness of a little known species, the tea-oil camellia, *C. oleifera*.



Camellia oleifera
hybrid 'Survivor',
tea-oil camellia

Photo: Kathy Barrowclough





Spring blooming *Camellia japonica* 'Kumasaka'.
Photo: Melinda Zoehrer

Hybridizers combined the hardiness of this white fall-blooming species from China with the floral attributes of traditional

varieties to provide a varied selection of new hardy hybrids which are now becoming available. Another event in the 1980's was the discovery of *Camellia japonica* growing wild on islands off the coast of Korea, the coldest place where this species grows wild. Introductions from these islands have proven to be significantly more cold hardy than any other japonicas previously grown in gardens.

These seductively beautiful camellias might be assumed to be finicky garden plants, but not so. They are perfectly suited to most local garden conditions, requiring well-drained acid soils, moderate shade, and shelter from drying wind and strong sun in winter. They happily tolerate clay soils and their deep roots provide remarkable drought tolerance once established. Spring planting is highly recommended to allow them to establish deep roots before winter. Provide an acidic mulch of pine needles or leaves and even a groundcover planting such as epimedium or hakone grass to protect the roots from deep freezing. Do not fertilize camellias during their first year; nor should they require it under most conditions thereafter.

Camellias also respond well to pruning to make them more compact and bushy. The finer textured fall bloomers can even be sheared into hedges. Just remember to prune only in spring, after flowering has ceased, to allow plenty of time for the next year's flower buds to form.

Include camellias in shrub borders for extended seasonal interest. Also integrate them into foundation plantings where they will receive additional shelter from the house to improve their blooming success during harsh weather, but bear in mind that the tall upright habit of most varieties makes them unsuitable for planting under windows. Camellias also make excellent companions for plants with similar bloom seasons. Consider associating them with mahonia (autumn and spring blooming), sweet box, *Corylopsis*, daffodils, scillas and snowdrops, to name just a few. The blue flowered *Aster oblongifolius* 'Fanny' blooms along with the fall camellias right up to Thanksgiving, even in the coldest weather! Imagine the possibilities!

If deer are your concern, remember that most camellias grow tall enough to exceed the reach of those browsing mouths, so it is worth planting and protecting them while young.

In season, camellias reign supreme as spectacular garden features. Global warming will serve to lengthen their effective bloom season into winter, while their southern roots and heat tolerance will enable them to shrug off the ill effects of hot summers. Once you've seen an established camellia planting in full bloom, you won't be able to resist having them for your own and you will anticipate the coming of autumn, accompanied by the first camellia blooms, like never before!

CHARLES CRESSON has grown camellias for 40 years and began trialing the

newer hardy hybrids in the mid 1980's. Charles is a Pennsylvania Director of the American Camellia Society and founded the Swarthmore Horticultural Society. He studied horticulture at the University of Vermont and the University of Bath in England. His career has included work in many local public gardens and also the Royal Horticultural Society in England. He is an instructor at Longwood Gardens, a nationally-known lecturer, and the author of three books. He is also responsible for Hedgleigh Spring, an early 20th Century flower garden in Swarthmore, which spans four generations of the Cresson family and is home to a large and diverse plant collection, with particular interest in perennials, rhododendrons and azaleas, hydrangeas, winter-blooming plants, hollies, and hardy palms.



Latin Name Common Name Mature Size Light Soil Pot Size, Plant Size Price

SPRING BLOOMING CAMELLIAS

Camellia chekiangoleosa 15-25' ● ● 3 g, 1' \$25
This Chinese species is closely related to *C. japonica* with large glossy leaves and even larger single red flowers with an unusual orange hue. These flowers are followed by very large fruit approaching the size of an apple. This species has done well in this region and may prove hardier than believed. Seeds can be pressed to make high-quality cooking oil. (Zone 7A)

Camellia cuspidata 6-10' ● ● 1 g, 2' \$25
A fine textured species, bearing many small white flowers among the small leaves in spring. New growth is flushed with red. Old plants may achieve the stature of a small tree. These plants are the hardiest form of this species, originating from a collection in the Huang Shan (Yellow Mountains) in Anhui Province, China, at the northern range of camellias. (Zone 7A)

Camellia japonica
'Adolphe Audusson Variegated' 8-15' ● ● 3 g, 3' \$35
This cultivar dates to the early 1940s, when it was selected as a mutant sport off of 'Adolphe Audusson', a historic selection from the 1870s. Large, semi-double blooms are deep scarlet red often with a prominent display of golden stamens. Individual blossoms display random blotches of white on the petals. (Zone 7)

Camellia japonica 'April Blush' 6-10' ● ● 3 g, 3' \$35
The "April Series" was bred for hardiness in the north where the most suitable conditions for bloom occur in April. 'April Blush' bears large single light pink flowers on a neat compact upright plant. (Zone 6B)

Camellia japonica 'April Kiss' 6-12' ● ● 3 g, 3' \$35
Another member of the hardy "April Series", 'April Kiss' has deep pink formal double flowers on a well formed upright rounded plant. While the flowers are only mid-sized, this cultivar was selected for the profusion of flowers making it a very good garden specimen. (Zone 6B)

Camellia japonica 'Berenice Boddy' 12-15' ● ● 3 g, 3' \$35
Among the older varieties, 'Berenice Boddy' stands out as being one of the hardiest in numerous gardens from Philadelphia and Long Island and has served as a parent in breeding new hardy varieties. It is also one of the more precocious varieties in sheltered locations, eager to open its first flowers as soon as weather permits in March (or even February) and continues through April. The single flowers are an enticing light pink with prominent yellow stamens. A versatile plant that remains one of the best. (Zone 6B)

Camellia japonica 'Hokkaido Red' 8' ● ● 1 g, 1-2' \$25
About 50 years ago, the seed for this variety was collected on the cold northern Japanese island of Hokkaido by Dr. John Creech of the US National Arboretum. It stood the test of time, thriving at Pleasant Run Nursery, near Trenton, and was recently

Spring blooming
Camellia japonica
'April Blush'.
Photo: Melinda Zoehrer





Spring blooming *Camellia japonica* 'Korean Snow'.
Photo: Melinda Zoehrer



Fall blooming *Camellia sinensis* 'Rosea'.
Photo: Kathy Barrowclough



Fall blooming *Camellia* 'Winter Star'.
Photo: Charles Cresson

Latin Name	Common Name	Mature Size	Light	Soil	Pot Size, Plant Size	Price
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named and introduced to the rest of us. Apart from its proven hardiness, you will want 'Hokkaido Red' for the bright red, trumpet-shaped flowers that begin in December and for the unusual purple color of its leaves during winter. (Zone 6B, at least)

Camellia japonica 'Korean Snow' 6-10' ● ☀ 1 g, 1' \$25
Of the plants introduced from the cold Korean islands, this is the only known white seedling; all others are red. The single pure white flowers create a striking contrast to the dark green glossy foliage in spring. Probably the hardiest white variety. (Zone 6B)

Camellia japonica 'Kumasaka' 6-10' ● ☀ 3 g, 3' \$35
Recorded in Japanese literature since 1695, this is one of the oldest camellia varieties. As it turns out, it is also one of the hardiest spring bloomers and has been a frequent breeding parent of the new cold hardy hybrids. As one of the latest varieties to bloom, 'Kumasaka' extends the season into the beginning of May. She has aged well over 300 years, remaining one of the most beautiful varieties with medium to large peony form flowers of a deep rose color and heavy substance. (Zone 6B)

Camellia japonica 'Magnolia Queen Pink' 6' ● ☀ 1 g, 1-2' \$25
Deep pink semi-double flowers with irregular petals adorn this old variety in April to early May on a bushy plant. It is a sport of the candy-striped 'Priscilla Brooks' which was originally introduced by the famous Magnolia Gardens in South Carolina. (Zone 7A)

Camellia japonica 'Sea Foam' 12-15' ● ☀ 1 g, 1-2' \$25
The white formal double flowers of this cultivar are perfection itself! Prepare yourself for this April spectacle on a vigorous upright plant. (Zone 7A)

Camellia japonica 'Tama Electra' 8' ● ☀ 1 g, 2-3' \$25
The small to medium size dark red single flowers are bordered with white in March and April on vigorous upright plants with a compact habit. An introduction of the famous Nuccio's Nursery in California. (Zone 7)

Camellia japonica 'Tama-No-Ura' 6-10' ● ☀ 3 g, 3' \$35
A truly unique and remarkably hardy Japanese variety discovered in the wild by a charcoal burner. The small single red flowers with a prominent white border and yellow stamens are just over 2 inches wide and occur in March and April. The plant habit is upright and open. Absolutely charming! (Zone 7A)

Camellia japonica 'Tomorrow' 10' ● ☀ 1 g, 1-2' \$25
These alluring strawberry red flowers can be very large in an irregular peony form in March and April. Plants have a vigorous open habit of growth. (Zone 7)

Camellia japonica 'Victory White' 8-10' ● ☀ 3 g, 3' \$35
The reason for growing this somewhat tender variety is the sheer quality of the large pure white semi-double peony-like blooms, scarce in hardier cultivars. Upright vigorous plant habit. (Zone 8)

FALL BLOOMING CAMELLIAS

Camellia 'Autumn Spirit' 8' ● ☀ 3 g, 3' \$35
Among the cold hardy *C. oleifera* hybrids, 'Autumn Spirit' has the deepest burgundy pink double flowers, which begin their show in October. This deep color is also more compatible with some of the yellow and orange fall foliage colors than are the bright pinks of many fall varieties. It is a moderately vigorous plant with a bushy upright habit. (Zone 6A)

Camellia oleifera Tea-Oil Camellia 12-15' ● ☀ 3 g, 2' \$35
The tea-oil camellia is an important crop in China where the large seeds are pressed to produce high quality oil used for cooking and other purposes. This is believed to be the hardiest species of camellia and has proved very useful in breeding for more cold hardy varieties. Single white flowers with narrow petals are produced in large numbers from mid October into December. Mid size leaves are a dark matte green. Even in our region this can become a large shrub or small tree exceeding 20 feet tall and wide. (Zone 6B)

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Camellia sinensis 7' ● ☀ 3 g, 3' \$35
No plant has had a greater effect on world economics, politics and culture than tea. Grown as a crop for thousands of years, the tea plant is also an interesting ornamental. The small white flowers with prominent yellow stamens begin to open in early September, the first of any fall blooming species, and continue all through November. The hardy tea plant makes a small bushy shrub so it is easy to fit it into a sheltered microclimate in colder regions. You can easily make your own green tea by harvesting the soft new growth and allowing it to dry. (Zone 7A)

Camellia sinensis 'Rosea' 4-6' ● ☀ 1 g, 1' \$25
This attractive cultivar differs from the common tea in its delightful pink flowers and purplish new growth. It may prove to be slightly less hardy. (Zone 7)

Camellia 'Survivor' 6-10' ● ☀ 3 g, 3' \$35
A fitting name for this plant which survived the severe winter cold of the late 70's in better condition than most others. 'Survivor' has single white blossoms lightly touched with a blush of pink and begins to bloom in mid October, continuing through November. Its hardiness and early bloom make this *C. oleifera* hybrid one of the best for northern gardens. It forms an upright moderately vigorous plant with small leaves. (Zone 6A)

Camellia × *vernalis* 'Shibori Egao' 4-6' ● ☀ 3 g, 3' \$35
The translation of "variegated smiling face" refers to the white blotches on the pink semi-double flowers. The plant habit is vigorous and upright. (Zone 7A)

Camellia × *vernalis* 'Yuletide' 8-10' ● ☀ 1 g, 1-2' \$25
The name says it all. Reds are rare among the fall blooming camellias and 'Yuletide' has the clearest red of all. Its long bloom season even includes the holiday season. Outdoors the flowers may be damaged by December cold, but 'Yuletide' makes a superb potted specimen for a cold sunroom where it will bloom for much of the winter. (Zone 7B)

Camellia 'Winter's Interlude' 6-12' ● ☀ 3 g, 3' \$35
The bright pink anemone flowers with a lighter center make a good show from late October on this rounded shrub. An additional feature is the exceptional plant hardiness of this *C. oleifera* hybrid. (Zone 6A)

Camellia 'Winter's Snowman' 6-12' ● ☀ 1 g, 1-2' \$25
When in full bloom, the large white anemone flowers of this *C. oleifera* hybrid are a real showstopper. Its flowering period is November and December on a vigorous upright plant. In spring, the new growth is wine colored. A sheltered location will help prolong the bloom season. (Zone 6A)

Camellia 'Winter's Star' 6-10' ● ☀ 3 g, 4' \$35
'Winter Star' is a popular and dependable performer in northern gardens due to its early onset of bloom in mid October. A long bloom season allows it the opportunity to open nearly all of its flower buds before winter. The rich pink single blooms are a delight on a vigorous upright plant. (Zone 6A)

Camellia 'Winter's Star White' 6-10' ● ☀ 3 g, 3' \$35
All of the beauty of *C. 'Winter's Star'* but with large single white flowers. (Zone 6A)

Spring blooming
Camellia japonica
'Sea Foam'.
Photo: Kathy Barrowclough





Camellia sasanqua 'Yuletide'.
Photo: Melinda Zoehrer



Tender *Camellia cbrysanthoides* foliage
Photo: John Frett



Tender *Camellia yubsienensis*.
Photo: John Frett

Latin Name Common Name Mature Size Light Soil Pot Size, Plant Size Price

TENDER CAMELLIA SPECIES

Camellia cbrysanthoides 6-8' ● ☀ 1 g, 1-2' \$35
PATRON EVENING ONLY. Truly yellow flowers have been one of the Holy Grails of the camellia world and this new species native to southern Guangxi, China definitely has the color! These 1.5-inch bright yellow flowers come in spring and the emerging foliage has a strong burgundy red color. The large mature foliage is distinctive with deeply impressed veins. (Zone 8B)

Camellia furfuracea 6-20' ● ☀ 1 g, 2' \$25
Grow this rare species for its stiff 7-inch long foliage with indented veins and the fruits which have a very unique scaly brown "furfuraceous" surface texture. This widely spread species is found in the forests of SE China, Vietnam and Laos where it can become a 30-foot tree. The greenish cream flowers aren't all that decorative, but a plant can't have everything! (Zone 7B?)

Camellia lutchuensis Fragrant Camellia 15-20' ● ☀ 1 g, 1' \$25
PATRON EVENING ONLY. This really choice winter blooming species, with masses of sweetly fragrant small white flowers among tiny narrow serrated leaves, has been used to breed fragrant hybrids. Although a vigorous grower, it makes a fine potted plant when pruned for size. A native of the Ryu Kyu Islands of southern Japan, it has minimal hardness, but makes a charming addition to a cool room or sun porch. (Zone 8-9)

Camellia octopetala 8-15' ● ☀ 1 g, 2.5' \$25
This fall blooming species has a very different look. The 2 inch pale yellow flowers are followed by huge brown fruits the size of oranges and the large glossy foliage has a light grayish-green cast. Widely distributed in China from southwestern Zhejiang province to western Fujian province, this is one of the hardier of these rare species. Definitely worth a try. (Zone 7A)

Camellia transnokoensis 6-10' ● ☀ 1 g, 2' \$25
The red spots on the outer petals of these 1.5 inch white flowers make this species especially distinctive in bud. This fine textured plant with inch long leaves is surprisingly hardy, considering it is a native of Taiwan. Late winter bloom. (Zone 7B)

Camellia truncata 6-8' ● ☀ 1 g, 1' \$25
Among the many recently discovered camellia species, *C. truncata* was only described in 1990. This fine textured plant is perfect in a pot and produces small 5 petaled flowers in late winter among small glossy pointed leaves. This species from Yunnan, China has not yet been trialed for hardness. (Zone 8?)

Camellia yubsienensis 4-8' ● ☀ 1 g, 2' \$25
In late winter, this species makes a spectacular floral display due to a very heavy bud set, sometimes with over a dozen long pointy buds at the tip of a branch, and the white flowers have pretty undulate wavy petals. Some clones have a nice fragrance. Small leaves have a reticulate venation. Native to the Chinese provinces of Hunan, Jiangxi and Guangdong. (Zone 7B?)



Fall blooming
Camellia japonica
'Tama Electra'.
Photo: Melinda Zoehrer



RECIPE FOR: Camellia Tea

INGREDIENTS/MATERIALS

- 2-3 Leaves from *Camellia* (*sinensis*) twigs
- 1 Sheet of paper for withering
- 1 Tea pot for brewing

DIRECTIONS

Step 1, Plucking: Cut off twigs with 2-3 of the younger fresher tip leaves (first flush) then pull off the individual leaves. This serves to prune and encourages new growth.

Step 2, Withering: Lay the leaves out on a sheet of paper in a warm place for 24 hours to wither and lose about 40% of their moisture.

Step 3, Rolling and Drying: Rolling the leaves breaks them up and releases natural enzymes (juices) which start the fermentation process.

Methods for Rolling and Drying:

• **Japanese Style Green Tea:**
Roll the leaves longways as tightly as possible between both hands to produce long twists of whole leaf. Place on a sheet of foil in a warm oven (245°F) for a maximum of 5 minutes. This dries the leaf and stops further fermentation. Do not burn.

• **Orthodox Indian Tea:**
Roll the leaves in a circular motion using both hands. Press as hard as possible to crush and break the leaves. Put the leaves in a paper bag for a day or two to ferment and lose some of their 'greenness' and develop a drier 'tea character'. Remove any stalk and stem, roll briefly and dry on a sheet of foil in a warm oven (245°F) for a maximum of 5 minutes. Do not burn.

Step 4, Brewing: Both of these processing methods maintain the leaf size and produce a light tea with natural aroma. Place a few leaves in a pot, or Chinese style in a bowl, add boiling water and allow to brew. The liquid should be pale and refreshing.

QUICK REFERENCE FOR CULTURAL SYMBOLS

In order to help you select the right plant for your gardening needs, we have included the symbols below to indicate plant needs. These are broad guidelines, as plants often can withstand a wider range of conditions. Plants that prefer part shade may grow well in full sun if there is adequate soil moisture during hot, dry spells. Similarly, plants that prefer moist soils may grow well in drier sites if some shade is provided, especially midday.

Light Recommendations

- full sun
- partial sun
- full shade

Soil Moisture Recommendations

- ☀ dry soil
- ☁ moist soil
- ☔ wet soil

Attract Birds, Butterflies and Caterpillars

- 🐦 birds
- 🦋 butterflies and caterpillars

Native

"N" after the plant description indicates plants are native to the Eastern United States. Cultivars of native plants are also considered native, as these are a selection from variants in the population.