

Southern Staple  
Kerrie Roach  
1.3.2020

The south has many staple flowering plants of the garden, but none put on a show like that of the camellia when the rest of the garden is bleak and dreary. Sometimes referred to as the 'rose of winter', the 'Camellia japonica' or Japanese camellia can be found in most any established southern landscape. With the popularity of the plant and the vast variety of different types, the cultivation and care of a Japanese camellia can sometimes be confounding.

First things first, which camellia is which? The easiest way to decide if you have a 'Camellia japonica' or a 'Camellia sasanqua' is by bloom time. Think J for January matches with J for japonica, and S for September matches with S for sasanqua. 'Camellia japonica' blooms in early spring/winter, usually around January. 'Camellia sasanqua' is the fall blooming camellia typically starting around September. So, if you have a camellia that is just now starting to bloom, you most likely are dealing with a Japanese camellia.

'Camellia japonica' has color variations from deep reds to pure whites, along with speckled and striped varieties, there is hue for everyone's taste. Most varieties prefer part-shade to shade locations with well drained soils, there may be a few exceptions. Camellias will typically tolerate our native acidic soils, but can occasionally suffer cold damage if temperatures dip into single digits. They are very slow growing plants and can take years to really establish in the soil, so a large hole at planting (2-3 times the rootball) and limiting stress for the first few years (water during drought periods) are key to long term survival.

When caring for your camellias, make sure all pruning is completed just after flowering finishes. If you prune later in the season, you may remove your flower buds for the next year. Disease and insect concerns are not often deadly. The most common problems being flower blight and scale.

- Flower blight causes spots then the rapid browning and drop of entire flowers. It is best controlled by sanitation measures, keep all leaf and spent flower debris underneath the shrub picked up and disposed. A fungicide spray of macozeb or captan can be used as a soil drench every 2 weeks from mid-December through January and can potentially lower the severity of the disease. Follow the labeled directions.
- Scales are piercing-sucking insects that feed on the vascular layer of the plant causing yellowing and dieback. Most scales can be found on the underside of the leaves. After the danger of cold weather is past in late winter, a horticultural oil can be used and should be applied according to the label. A mix of soapy water (insecticidal soap) can also be used during the growing season when crawlers (think 'baby scales') are present.

'Camellia japonica' flowers are one of my favorite. When everything else in the garden is sleeping, the camellia is proudly showing off her multitude and color of blooms. If you do not already have one in your landscape, this is one plant I definitely suggest adding. If it does nothing more than draw a smile on a cold, rainy, dreary January day, it has served its purpose well.