

CAMELLIAS

COMMON NAME: camellia

COMMON BOTANICAL NAMES: *Camellia japonica* and *C. sasanqua*

PLANT TYPE: evergreen shrub

FLOWER COLORS: pink, red, variegated, and white

ORIGINS: China, Japan, and Southeast Asia

IDEAL GROWING CONDITIONS: partial sun; well-drained but moist and acidic soil

SIZE: 8 to 15 feet tall, 6 feet wide

ZONES: 7 to 10

BLOOMING TIME: September through April. Sasanquas bloom in late fall through early winter, and japonicas follow in late winter through spring.

ARRANGING TIPS: Cut blooms with as much of the woody stem attached as possible and choose buds that are just barely cracking open to allow the petals to unfurl over the course of several days. When blooms droop, trim stems away and float heads in a bowl of water.

VASE LIFE: Four days to one week

MEANINGS: evanescence and long-lasting love

TRIVIA: Renowned French botanist André Michaux is credited with introducing outdoor-thriving camellias to America via Charleston, South Carolina, in 1786. Drawn to the Lowcountry for its temperate climate, Michaux spent a decade tending to his experimental gardens in the Goose Creek area. While there, he gifted several of these camellias to friends at Middleton Place Plantation and soon the shrubs spread throughout the region. • By the mid-1800s, major collections thrived in the South—there were some 300 varieties at Charleston’s Magnolia Plantation alone—and a significant camellia nursery was established in Augusta, Georgia. • Today, many of those early camellias still grow on the grounds of Middleton amid more than 2,000 newer varieties, and Magnolia’s gardens are still rich with the plants as well. • Camellias are the state flower of Alabama and the city flower of Slidell, Louisiana.





To ensure tiny bud vases don't topple under the weight of a bloom, place pebbles in the base of the vessel. 'Pink Perfection' was brought to Europe from Japan in 1875 and has long been a Southern favorite, as the 10- to 12-foot shrub can flower well into the spring in warmer zones. Eudora Welty's Jackson, Mississippi, home boasts some forty camellia bushes, including this variety (*facing*). Deep windowsills make a dream spot for bud vases, but know that sunlight speeds up their demise, and that dappled light or shade is best for cut flowers, unless you're trying to force blooms open. The blue and gold of these Russian vessels contrast sweetly with the white blossom of a semi-double camellia, so-called for its two rows of petals (*right*).





SOUTHERN STORY: A CARE PACKAGE

Back in the 1940s, Eleanor Ilderton was the first of her family's generation to leave Charleston, South Carolina's Lowcountry when she married and moved to High Point, North Carolina. And though her new city was a mere state away, it was a world apart from Eleanor's childhood haunts such as Fenwick Hall Plantation, where she used to visit her Aunt Nellie. A sprawling estate on a sea island, Fenwick Hall was known for its prolific spread of live oaks and sea of lush camellias; by comparison, Eleanor's first Tarheel garden inevitably came up short.

Nevertheless, the ambitious young woman and a host of new girlfriends founded their own little garden club named the Garden Makers. But when it came time for Eleanor to host, her fledgling flowerbeds and still-stumpy shrubs had yielded little-to-no homegrown blooms to dress the house for the gathering. Somehow, back home in Charleston, Aunt Nellie caught wind of the coming party and rallied Eleanor's mother.

"Carrie," Aunt Nellie supposedly said to her sister, "we've got to get that child some camellias." The two set upon Fenwick's legendary flora,

cutting bloom after prize bloom. They took their bounty to Nellie's kitchen and floated the camellia heads in cool water while they cut raw potatoes into wedges so they could easily drive the flower stems into the tuber's flesh. With the blooms thus rooted, the pair started sewing the camellias to the base of the box with thread and needle so as to secure them in place.

When the box was brimming, the sisters tucked Spanish moss around the heads and lightly watered the lot of it to keep the flowers fresh. They covered the blooms with a layer of wax paper, tied the box with twine, addressed it, and drove the whole thing to the bus station where they bought it a one-way ticket to High Point.

"I can't tell you how exciting it was to head to the station here to see what they had been up to," says Eleanor, remembering the times when instant communication equaled a party phone line at best and packages were a lifeline. Needless to say, the homegrown blooms were the hit at that Garden Makers' meeting. And since then, just as Eleanor eventually came into her own, so did her camellias.





Cluster a collection of smaller vessels to create the illusion of copious centerpiece. When choosing bouquet bedfellows, look to what's blooming at the same time; paperwhites and Camellia japonicas both show their faces in late winter (*facing*). If you can't clip much stem, or if your camellias are on the way out, fill a bowl with cool water and float the heads in it to extend their "shelf life." As for this vessel? It's a \$3 thrift-store find (*right*).





BEHIND THE SCENES

Sometimes you have to look no further than your own backyard to find a trove of stunning blooms. To gather the winning camellias seen here, Heather and I had to look just a little farther, into our neighbors' backyards.

First we headed to the James Island, South Carolina, home of Peter Frank Edwards, who photographed this book. Frank moved into his 1950s ranch a few years ago, and when the cool air hits, scores of sixty-year-old camellias envelope the place. Towering up to a story high and tucked under a canopy of live oaks, Frank's camellias are so wild and lush that they dominate the half-acre lot with their glossy evergreen leaves, plump buds and frilly blossoms.

After filling our buckets there, we headed about five minutes away to an oak-lined street that dead ends at Wappoo Creek, a meandering but powerful waterway that cuts through the marshes clinging to the edges of Charleston. There, we found Kristin Newman's stone-faced cottage, which, like Frank's home, came with its own decades-old Eden. Every last one of Kristin's camellia shrubs drooped under the pregnant weight of pale white, soft pink, and flecked heads, and by morning's end, the flower van—and the grey winter's day—was all the brighter for their colorful show. In the wake of the shoot at my mother's French Quarter home, we left a trail of bouquets, and January there has never been so vibrant.

Leave glossy evergreen camellia leaves on the stem to provide a colorful contrast to the soft texture and palette of petals. Showy blooms like camellias make for great single-stemmed bouquets. The variegation seen in camellias is often a result of a common virus or genetics (*facing*).





Allow a bouquet to be a little unruly and inconsistent and it mimics the organic beauty of a naturally growing plant.



'Jessie Gale' 1958

'Spring Sonnet' 1951

'Cup of Beauty' 1848

'C.M. Wilson' 1949

'Pink Perfection' 1875

'C.M. Hovey' 1853

'Professor Charles S. Sargent' 1925

'Ville de Nantes' 1910