

BLOOMS EVERY DAY OF THE YEAR

ROSES IN THE SUN, CAMELLIAS IN THE SHADE

By Marty Hammond

All who grow roses, are well aware of the sun requirements for roses. If you're serious about growing roses, as I am, your landscape centers around roses. However, we have quite a bit of shaded area; we designed our yard and covered patio in such a way so we can also enjoy many shade loving plants. Just about everyone has some shade or filtered sun somewhere in their landscape; a spot in your garden where house walls, fences, hedges or large shrubs and trees provides sun and wind protection. There are many sun loving companions for our roses, however, I want my shade plants to also compliment my roses. This last winter, my Amaryllis bulbs took the spotlight during December and January. I have them all in containers, and they are very rewarding for the effort spent in forcing dormancy and re-potting. I also had 10 Camellias, all but one in containers, which I have always enjoyed. The majority of Camellias bloom from about November through March so even though their blooming period is short, it's when the roses are dormant with few if any blooms.

I wanted to learn more about Camellias, so I joined the Orange County Camellia Society. I was pretty ignorant about how to take care of the camellias, and at my first Camellia society meeting, I learned I wasn't ignoring them enough, and I was feeding them at the wrong time. Most Camellias don't just die, they are killed by too much TLC. Upon seeing the beautiful display brought to the meeting, I was hooked. I had to have more of these very easy to care for shade loving shrubs. The roses were pruned, and other than the 10 Camellias, daffodils and 60 Amaryllis bulbs, which don't bloom all at the same time, the yard looked pretty bare. I decided to buy 17 new varieties of Camellias in one gallon pots from 'Green Thumb Nursery', and we enjoyed gorgeous blooms right away. I now am of the opinion that Camellias are the 'perfect' shade companion to my Roses.

I did some necessary research in our 'RSSM Garden Library' to learn the do's and don'ts of Camellia culture, and I waked to the experts in the Camellia Society. To my amazement, I learned that Camellias are dormant, when they are setting on bloom buds and blooming. Although there seems to be some disagreement on when to fertilize, the majority say you DO NOT feed them when they are setting on buds and blooming - from about September till April. I followed this advice and literally ignored my Camellias. I kept those I had placed on the front walkway watered, because the rain couldn't get to them, but other than that, I did nothing but enjoy their beautiful blooms. What a wonderful treat to have all those gorgeous blooms while the roses looked so barren.

If you plant Camellias, you need to be aware of their needs. If planting under a big tree, set the plant at least 6 feet away from the trunk, or as I have done, plant in containers, which can be moved as needed, and will not be choked by tree roots. Camellias are one of the best plants for long-term residence in containers, and they are easy to grow. This does not mean they are void of any problems from insects, disease and fungus, but overall, I consider them easier to care for than my roses.

Camellias will get much larger if planted in the ground, but the ability to move them around is a distinct advantage of planting in containers. Most are slow growing, and even the smallest plant I purchased which was only 14" tall, gave me several very double blooms

4-5" across. One Camellia I've had in a container for six years, is now only about 3' tall and as wide, and it gave me about 2 dozen blooms in January and February, and it just loves the lack of direct sun on our front walkway. Even though there is no sun, there is plenty of light in this area. I added nine Camellias to this front walk area, the rest are where they get shade or filtered sun, which is what they like the best. Some Camellias do get rather large, and even though planting in a container will keep them smaller than if planted in the ground, you need to think about their eventual size. Another plus to Camellias; their foliage is always very neat and dark green year

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around, with very little leaf drop. Camellias are excellent as cut flowers, making wonderful arrangements of just a single bloom, floating in a dish makes a delightful table centerpiece.

The dormant season (Sept. through April), when they are setting on bloom buds and blooming, is the best time to repot or plant in the ground. I potted my new Camellias I had purchased in 1 gallon pots, up into two gallon containers. I had very little pruning to do, which if any is needed, is done when they finish blooming. I started a feeding program in May, with fish emulsion, ½ recommended strength, followed up in June with a light feeding of Cottonseed Meal, a slow-acting organic fertilizer. Then once a month in July & August, I fed 'Miracid', a liquid acidic fertilizer, ½ strength, and I mulched them once. Some Camellias need no feeding whatsoever, other than a good mulch renewed annually. The experts seem to agree, "it is better to underfeed them to overfeed". If you feel you must feed, use Cottonseed meal, which I s unanimously recommended by Camellia experts, or an acidic fertilizer (1/2 strength) made expressly for shade plants. Now I ask you, how much easier can this be?

Flower buds on the Camellias start forming in August, so now I must decided whether to 'disbud' or not. I really don't want to deliberately cut flower buds off my roses, and I have the same struggle when I go to twist buds off my Camellias. Most Camellias will produce more than one flower bud at each leaf junction where buds form, and in some varieties there may be three to six or more buds in each cluster. The result will be plenty of color but smaller individual flowers. If you want larger "exhibition" quality blooms, then you will need to disbud. If you decide to disbud, leave one or two blower buds at the end of each branch, and moving back on the stem, leave one flower bud every 3 or 4 inches. Spare flower buds of different sizes; the smaller ones will mature later and prolong the bloom season. To remove a bud, grasp it firmly and gently twist it off. If you try to pull or break it off, you may accidentally remove the growth bud as well. This disbudding practice is a matter of personal preference, depending on what you want from your Camellias.

Camellias like a light, humus rich growing medium that is porous and moist, and always well drained. Sound familiar? Sounds like my mini Roses! I use the same potting soil for the Camellias as I do for the roses, (equal parts potting soil, 'perlite' or pumice and peat moss) however; I added a little ground bark and a little extra 'perlite' to the mix for even better drainage. If you add ground bark, use the 1/8 to ¼ inch pieces. I even go to the extreme, and sift the bark though my ½" x1/2" welded wire sifter, and use the larger pieces for top mulch. Frequent watering is required since drainage is excellent and the top few inches will dry out more rapidly than other mixes. Being able to use the same container mix for the Camellias as I do the for roses, makes it very easy and convenient for me.

The rule for water requirements is to keep roots moist the year around, but not soggy. Again, this is the same rule for the miniature roses in containers. Insufficient water during the period when Camellia flower buds are developing will often result in failure of flowers to fully develop and open properly. Apply enough water to dampen all the roots. If your Camellia is properly planted with good drainage, you run little risk of harming it by over-watering; the danger lies in under watering.

There is a lot more to growing good Camellias, I've touched on just some basics. Like growing roses, there are special steps to take to get those "perfect" exhibition blooms for the show table, however, that is not my goal. I want mass color in my yard, with lots of blooms. I suggest **YOU** consider some Camellias in your landscape. I think you'll find as I have, Camellias are very enjoyable and easy to care for. I've added several more to my collection since my February acquisitions. I now have 45, and looking for more areas where I can put even more – maybe even hang some like I do the roses. I'll begin re-potting the Amaryllis bulbs the middle of November, so I expect to have a bountiful, beautiful Winter season full of gorgeous blooms. I'm really looking forward to the Winter blooms, just as I look forward to my roses blooming in the Spring, Summer

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and Fall. I feel very confident from now on, both we and our neighbors will be enjoying many wonderful **BLOOMS EVERY DAY OF THE YEAR.**