



The Potting Bench



Welcome to this month's installment of "*The Potting Bench*"! As we plan our North Florida suburban landscapes, it is easy to focus all our energy on spring and summer blooms. However, if you want a dependable, long-lived shrub that provides a spectacular display of colorful flowers during the fall and winter, the classic **Camellia** is an absolute must-have.

While some camellias can grow quite large, there are many compact and dwarf varieties available that fit perfectly into smaller suburban yards or statement containers.

Here is your guide to sourcing, transplanting, and maintaining beautiful Camellias in your landscape:

Sourcing Your Camillia

You can find camellias at local nurseries, garden festivals, and specially hosted camellia flower shows, which are great places to find unique or heirloom varieties. There are two main types to consider. **Camellia japonica** typically has larger leaves and spectacular, showy flowers, while **Camellia sasanqua** has smaller leaves but blooms incredibly profusely.

Varieties

Because our warm falls can delay early bloomers, midseason flowering varieties (blooming November through January) generally perform best here. For a compact footprint, look for **C. sasanqua** 'Shishigashira' (a dwarf variety with rosy-red blooms) or 'Yuletide' (an upright, compact grower with single red flowers and prominent yellow stamens).

Transplanting and Placement

- **When to Plant:** The best time to plant camellias is from November to February. This allows their root systems to establish before the harsh summer heat arrives.
- **Light:** *Camellia japonica* performs best in partial shade. The *sasanqua* types can tolerate full sun, but they still prefer some protection from the harsh afternoon heat.
- **Soil and Planting:** Camellias demand well-drained, acidic soil with a pH between 5.0 and 6.5. If your soil is very sandy, amend the entire planting bed with 3 to 6 inches of organic matter. Dig a hole two to three times wider than the root ball, but slightly shallower—the top of the root ball must sit 1 to 2 inches above the soil line to allow for settling. They cannot tolerate being planted too deeply.

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Maintenance

- **Watering and Mulch:** Apply a 2- to 3-inch layer of mulch (like pine straw) around the plant to conserve moisture, but keep it pulled back from the actual root ball to allow for air exchange. Camellias are fairly drought-tolerant once established, but need about an inch of water every 10 to 14 days during dry spells, and weekly watering while flowering. Be careful not to overwater, as they are highly susceptible to root rot if kept too wet.
- **Feeding:** Camellias require very little fertilizer. You can apply a specialized, acid-forming "Azalea & Camellia" fertilizer once or twice a year: first in spring after they finish blooming, and optionally again in early to midsummer. Never fertilize in late summer or fall, as this pushes tender new growth that can easily be damaged by winter cold.
- **Pruning:** These shrubs possess a naturally beautiful form and require minimal pruning. If you need to shape the plant or remove dead, crossing, or low-hanging branches, do so in late winter or early spring right after the blooming finishes. Avoid pruning in late summer, or you will accidentally cut off all of your winter flower buds.
- **Pest Watch:** The most common pest to look out for is "tea scale," which appears as white, cottony masses or gray/black bumps on the undersides of the leaves, often causing yellow splotches on top. If you spot this, an application of horticultural oil in late winter or early spring will help smother the pests.

