

See Camellia Christmas at

See Camellia Christmas at Maclay Gardens



Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: Camellias such as this 'Drama Girl' are beginning to bloom now and will be featured at the Maclay Gardens Camellia Christmas event next Friday.

Steve Harley is Groundskeeping Supervisor at Alfred B. Maclay Gardens State Park and a member of the UF-IFAS Extension Advisory Committee for Leon County . <http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu>

November 30, 2003

The camaraderie of camellia lovers is unparalleled to that for any other plant in our society. Crossing national and linguistic boundaries, spanning across the globe, this passion for the camellia is centuries old. It is truly amazing that a plant species more than a thousand years old originating from a small group of Asian islands has had such a large impact on our horticultural world. Until the introduction into the European and the Western world, these beauties could only be found in palaces, showcased in temples, highlighted by Asian religious communities and growing wild in their native lands.

Were these magnificent bloomers launched into Western society by greed or was it purely by chance? Tea became so popular around the world that governments seized an opportunity to tax this relaxing beverage. The first living *Camellia japonica* seen by westerners appeared on the scene in London aboard a merchant trading ship early in the eighteenth century. Obtained by bribing Chinese officials, these plants, thought to be *Camellia sinensis*, the tea plant, had been switched for the more decorative *C. japonica*. To the surprise of the merchant, the leaves were useless for tea making.

Most of us probably associate the camellias' earliest days in America with the traditional confederate plantation, southern belles, and sipping sweet tea on the front porch rocking chair. The first documented camellia (a single red) in the United States was imported from England to Hoboken , New Jersey in 1797 by John Stevens. As nurserymen and growers began importing and raising camellia plants from seed, these pioneers obtained and created many new varieties. It is amazing that in just a little over 200 years we have transformed a limited number of camellias into over 2000 species and cultivars whose numbers are still growing today.

As an employee at Maclay Gardens State Park I have a wonderful and challenging task to care for these late season bloomers. The flowers of these plants come in many impeccable shapes, sizes and colors, ranging from the purest white to dazzling pinks and from bold reds to majestic bluish purples. Along with many patterns of

See Camellia Christmas at

flower variegation, this flowering shrub displays glossy green foliage and curious leaf shapes that make the camellia a treasure for summer foundation plantings or for standing alone in the garden. While the winter is nearing and we are preparing for this blooming season, the buds on the japonicas are as numerous as I have seen in years. The Garden Staff is predicting a heavy bloom for our old treasures.

Growing Camellias:

Now through February is an excellent time to establish these showy shrubs. Plant your new camellias in a site that will locate them on the north or west side of a building. During hard freezes, this will allow the buds to thaw out gradually before exposing them to direct sunlight. Camellias will benefit from a location that is partially shaded, and you will need to make sure that the soil drains well because they do not perform well with wet feet. They also prefer acidic soil high in organic matter which can be added at the time of planting and throughout the year with applications of pine bark or straw mulch.

Watering and fertilizing the juvenile camellia is important, but japonicas are easy to grow after they get established. Once you've gotten your camellia on its way to a long and prosperous life it will thrive with minimal or no fertilizer added. Also make sure to water them during dry times in the summer and winter for maximum flower production.

Occasional light pruning can be done all year round, even when they are flowering, and since these plants are such slow growers, pruning will not be at the top of the to-do list. Remember that shearing will produce an unwanted form that has an unnatural look. Winter and early spring is optimal for the heavier pruning, keeping in mind that air circulation is important to help prevent unwanted pests that will cause harm to the plant.

A perfect opportunity to see the start of the camellia bloom season is to visit Maclay Gardens State Park for the annual Camellia Christmas event. For many people in Tallahassee, it has become the official "kick-off" to the holiday season. Join us on Friday evening December 5th from 6:00 to 9:00 p.m., to take a stroll along the candle-lit brick walk. Stop for a moment to enjoy a cup of hot apple cider and cinnamon to ward off the early December chill. Snack on Christmas cookies as you listen to carols sung by local choirs and entertainers.

The highlight is the Maclay House Museum, decked in fresh greenery and camellias. If you have not seen the Maclay House at Camellia Christmas, you have missed something truly special. The park admission fee is waived, and kind donations are cheerfully accepted.

We hope that you will reward your green thumb and plant a camellia. If you have questions, please feel free to call us at the Park Office at 850-487-4115, or you can visit us on the web at www.FloridaStateParks.org/MaclayGardens/.

###