

This Plant Will Make an Ideal Last Minute Christmas Gift



Camellia, Nuccio's Bella Rossa' by Diana Lundin

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Christmas is next Saturday, just six days away. If you haven't found just the perfect gift for that favorite gardener there is still time. The solution to your problem is at hand. Why not give a living gift, a plant. Something that will be around to enjoy for many years. A quick trip to your local nursery or garden center will solve your last minute shopping dilemma.

A number of plants were considered as candidates for this article but one just jumped out as the uncontested champ and a good selection is readily available at all of the local nurseries

Just what is so special about this plant? It is a beautiful flowering evergreen shrub with glossy dark green foliage that is attractive all year long; produces spectacular blossoms; is very well suited to our climate; and its relatively slow growth makes it quite easy to maintain. This is also a good time to plant shrubs. Best of all they are starting to bloom at Christmas time. You can even enjoy its magnificent blossoms as cut flowers. If you are a Christmas traditionalist the flowers come in many shades of red. Would your gardener like a beautiful shiny green plant covered with bright red blossoms on Christmas day? By now you have probably guessed that I am talking about a camellia.

The camellia comes in several species, the two most noted for landscape planting are *Camellia japonica* and *Camellia sasanqua*. As a matter of interest a related species *Camellia sinensis*, is the source of common black or green tea.

The most popular camellia in our area is *Camellia japonica*. Its name gives a hint of where it comes from,

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China and Japan . This species has large peony or rose shaped flowers ranging in color from a deep red to a pure white including some variegated red and white. They make excellent cut flowers often displayed floating in a shallow bowl.

Some cultivars of this species can grow very large reaching twenty feet in height and ten or more feet in girth at maturity. They like shade to partial shade. They bloom from late fall through late winter providing a bright spot in the landscape during a usually drab time of the year.

Camellia sasanqua is gaining in popularity. It is a smaller plant and flowers earlier in the fall than C. japonica. Although the flowers are much smaller and more fragile than C.japonica they are produced in greater profusion and are delicately fragrant. The C. sasanqua thrives in sun and light shade and will tolerate some salt spray. It can be trained as an espalier form. A very attractive and well known cultivar of this species has red blossoms and is in bloom now. It is appropriately named for the season, "Yuletide".

I became aware of the camellia shortly after moving to Tallahassee in January, 1979 when I was invited to visit Maclay Gardens . The camellia collection was at its prime at the time. Influenced by that visit I planted a few camellias when I landscaped the yard of our new home. These have been added to over the years as I soon discovered how easy they were to care for. I have been rewarded by twenty five years of carefree pleasure watching these plants grow, enjoying their magnificent blooms each winter and now have a landscape highlighted with mature beauties. There are so many cultivars to choose from that I hesitate to start naming any. There are two I am particularly fond of, a pure white with spectacularly large blossoms called "Nuccio's Gem" and a special pink with a formal double blossom called "Pink Perfection". But every camellia grower has their own favorites.

That is why I can so strongly recommend them and why I feel a camellia would make an excellent gift. I will caution you that you may run into a problem, that will be trying to decide on which plant you like best. I usually wind up leaving with more than one. You may even want to treat yourself to a plant of your own while you are there. If you accuse me of being partial my only reply is "guilty as charged".

To see what a fully mature camellia in full bloom looks like a visit to Maclay Gardens will certainly be a pleasant experience. Good shopping and have a Merry Christmas.

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