

Is now the time for some color in your garden

Is now the time for some color in your garden? Why not try planting a Camellia



Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: Camellias bring a splash of color to a local garden.

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Is there a time when you wish it was already spring, when the plants and flowers are bursting forth? This time of year makes us long for some liveliness in the garden, some spots of color and a bit of zip. Color helps banish wintry blues, bringing us a bit of cheer at a time when frost and icy winds make us shiver! Unfortunately, there are only a few plants than can provide this wished for color in our frosted Tallahassee gardens. There is, however, one big shrub that wields a magic wand. We are fortunate to be able to grow a landscape plant that blooms during its dormant period, now, in many shades and mixtures of reds, pinks and whites. That plant is the queen of the southern garden: the camellia.

A handsome plant with shiny leaves and elegant flowers, some of which are striped, others look as if huge drops of colored inks fell on them and still others are plain. They dazzle the eye with blooms that range from small and lady-like single forms to large semi-double and completely double peony forms. Some petals are fringed, some rounded others are waved or notched. They are very long lived and grow in a variety of sizes and shapes in both the plants and flowers.

Native to Southeast Asia , camellias were brought to Europe several centuries ago and grown by royalty. In the mid-1700's camellias journeyed to the new world. Restricted to a narrow zone, they do not grow outdoors much further north than Atlanta or Charleston and not much further south than Orlando , so you see, Tallahassee is at the heart of camellia growing country.

Blooms begin opening as early as September and some varieties even bloom late into spring. Freezes will damage current blooms, but the tight buds will open as soon as there is a warm spell, producing a fresh burst of

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flowers. Camellias grow in the same type of acid soil as azaleas and will grow in many different locations. Not only do camellias look great outdoors but you can display the blooms floating in a glass or crystal bowl any where in your home, lasting sometimes, a week. What a great way to brighten up your dinner table. Their stems are short making them difficult to show off in a vase but it can be done in a narrow vase if filled to the top with water.

There are over several thousand varieties of camellias and our local nurseries carry many of the most common varieties. If you would like to see and compare many of the common, and not so common varieties, visit the annual Tallahassee Camellia show which is open to the public and is free on Saturday, January 8th from 1:00 to 5:00 pm and January 9th from 1:00 to 5:00 pm at the Doyle Conner Agricultural Center (located on Doyle Conner Boulevard, just south of the federal prison on Capital Circle Southeast). You will be able to view approximately a thousand blooms of many different varieties by growers and enthusiasts from Florida , Georgia , Alabama and the Carolinas . Some blooms will be extravagant others will be simply beautiful, but there will be camellia for most anyone's taste.

Not looking for a plant for yourself but want to give someone something special for Valentines Day? A camellia makes a lovely gift that will provide blooms now and for years to come. If you would like to obtain a special camellia most likely not found in the local nurseries, come to the Tallahassee Camellia Club annual plant auction which will be held February 8th at the Capital City Country Club. You may come for dinner at 6:30 , in which case reservations are required, or just come at 7:30 to bid on these very special plants.

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