Because they’re so common in our area you may think of camellias as ordinary garden shrubs, but please think again! They are unique and wonderful because they bloom during the winter months, just in time for Christmas and the other holidays celebrated in winter. What happy accident of nature created this tendency to bloom during the dormant season? I know of no other shrub or tree that does so.

In northern climates, tiny flowers of crocus bulbs may peek above the snow, hellebores or Lenten roses may bloom in January; and in our area there are herbaceous annual flowers that, with luck, may bloom through the cold months. We have redbuds and cherry trees that bloom as early as late January or in February, along with oriental magnolias. But these are all considered harbingers of spring, blooming very early to give hope that warmer weather really will come.

The camellia though, is the only large woody shrub designed to set flower buds in late fall and begin blooming in early winter. The flowers come in many colors, sizes and forms to brighten our days all through the holiday season. The full spectrum of camellia cultivars will grow in only a narrow band across the country – aren’t we fortunate to be right in the middle of it? If you have any ground space at all, and live in or around Tallahassee, you really must have at least one camellia bush to enjoy.
Sasanqua camellias bloom early and profusely. Some are faintly scented and drop many flower petals on the ground, leading to names like ‘Snow on the Mountain.’ These have smaller leaves and flowers than do the Japonica camellias, the most common of the large-flowered species in our area. There are literally thousands of varieties or cultivars of Camellia japonica.

A visit to Maclay Gardens State Park is a great way to see mature specimens of camellias. Many of these varieties are available to buy at garden centers and nurseries. When you discover your favorite, select a suitable spot for planting. Camellias thrive in rich well drained soil and in a semi-shaded location. The high shifting shade under a grove of pine trees is ideal, but any spot that won’t get full afternoon summer sun will be suitable.

Dig a planting hole at least twice the width of the root ball, but no deeper, so that settling won’t occur, as planting too deeply results in sure death. Camellias need plenty of mulch to help retain moisture and repel weeds, and if using pine straw, the plants will benefit from the added organic matter as the straw decomposes. You should mulch about three inches deep.

Camellias are great cut flowers and can be arranged in many ways, either incorporated with other foliage and flowers on tall stemmed bouquets, or as single blossoms floating in a shallow bowl of water.

December 4, 2009 marks the 21st anniversary of Camellia Christmas at Maclay Gardens, when the Maclay House is decked out with greenery and camellias from the Gardens. Come between 6 and 9 p.m. for a stroll along moonlit paths and enjoy hot cider and cookies as you view the many ways that camellias can be used to decorate for the holidays. The event is free, however, donations are welcomed to help cover costs. Call 487-4556 for further information.

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