

December in the Tallahassee Garden



Photo by Beth Weidner: Camellias, starting to bloom now, are featured at the Camellia Christmas event Friday evening at Alfred B. Maclay Gardens State Park, 6-9 p.m.

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Isn't this a great place to live during the winter? Not only can we laugh at northern cousins when they're snowed in, but we can also feel sorry for south Florida friends who don't experience the changing seasons. Of course we make up for it during muggy dog days so we're perfectly entitled to a little chuckle at the expense of the snow-bound.

One of the great benefits of living here is the beauty of our gardens in the winter. We have the perfect climate for camellias, which give us flowers of many shapes described with names such as "peony," "rose-form double," and "anemone." The colors are clear and brilliant in shades of pink, red and white, sometimes all on the same bush or even the same flower!

The showy flowers range in size from tiny sparkling dots to huge blowsy blooms. What could be more cheery? And how many other shrubs can you name that flower during the dormant season?

Camellias grace our gardens with dark green, glossy leaves, and have imposing stature and structure, thus forming a perfect backdrop for other plants and flowers. Blooming begins in the fall, with cultivars of *Camellia sasanqua* showering colorful petals onto the ground. As fall gives way to winter, the larger flowers of *Camellia japonica* begin to open, lighting up the landscape and giving us masses of blooms to bring indoors to float in bowls of water.

We're also lucky to be able to grow flowering annuals throughout our usual winters. Pansies and violas top this list, with others that may nap during the coldest days, but will usually survive with a little protection to bloom again when the weather warms and the sun shines. Calendula, stock, petunias, million bells or calibrachoa, dianthus, alyssum, and a few other more unusual selections may be found in local nurseries.

As winter turns to early spring, sometimes by mid-January to early February, the camellias are joined by oriental magnolias, cherry trees and redbuds. Soon after the Carolina yellow jessamine will begin to flower, and then it won't be long before the dogwoods and azaleas create a riot of color, giving us even more reason to be glad we live in Tallahassee!

The beauty of the winter garden is seen to great advantage at Alfred B. Maclay Gardens State Park. The gardens are open every day from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Camellia Christmas, scheduled for Friday, December 2nd, from 6 to 9 p.m., affords a chance to see camellias and greenery used as decoration, as the Maclay House is decked for the holidays. Seasonal music will be presented, hot cider and cookies will be served and the brick path will be lighted with hundreds of candles. The event is free; donations are welcome and it's a great way to start the holidays. Call 850-487-4556 for more information.

Come join us and enjoy a time to be immersed in a beautiful Tallahassee winter garden.

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