Plant Camellias for winter color

Camellias are excellent shrubs for our southern landscapes. They brighten our winter gardens with huge, beautiful flowers and provide shiny, evergreen foliage throughout the year. Now is an excellent time to select blooming camellias and plant them in your landscape.

Success with camellias first begins with an appropriate planting site. Part sun to part shade is best. Choose a location that receives approximately four hours of direct sun in the morning and shade in the afternoon or a spot that receives light, dappled shade throughout the day.

When planted in full sun, camellias can become stressed. The foliage sometimes has a yellowish or bronze look, and flower buds may not open properly.

Camellias prefer well-drained, slightly acid soils. Soil pH should ideally range from 5.0 to 5.5. Camellias are acid-loving plants, and an alkaline soil (pH above 7) can limit their ability to obtain some nutrients, especially iron.

As with planting all trees and shrubs, depth of planting is very important. Make sure they are planted with the upper surface of the root ball slightly above the soil level. Apply mulch two to three inches thick around each newly planted camellia.

Although excellent drainage is necessary, camellias need adequate water – especially during hot, dry spells in the summer. This is particularly important for newly planted shrubs during their first year.

Camellias should require little pruning if they are properly placed in the landscape. Necessary pruning should be done in late winter after flowering. Prune by removing undesirable branches to retain a natural shape and branching habit. Shearing should be avoided because it will result in a dense layer of foliage that blocks light from the interior branches. Shearing also destroys the natural plant form.
Fertilize camellias in the spring as new growth begins – about March or early April. Use a fertilizer labeled for acid-loving plants such as an “azalea-camellia special”.

Be sure to pick up and destroy the fallen blooms. Camellia blooms can become infected with a fungus called petal blight. Camellia petal blight causes brown lesions to develop on the bloom with the centers discoloring first. The bloom will then rot and drop prematurely.

A combination of sanitation, cultural practices, and fungicide treatments may be required to control camellia petal blight. In addition to collecting and destroying all the diseased blooms, remove much of the old mulch, and then add a layer of fresh mulch around the base of the camellia each spring. The new mulch will interfere with the spread of spores to the flower buds.

Tea scale is the most serious pest of camellias. These insects feed primarily on the undersides of the leaves, but in cases of extremely heavy infestations, they may also be found on the upper surfaces. The undersides of infested leaves will be covered with white and brown slightly fuzzy masses, which eventually will lead to yellow blotches on the upper surfaces. Infested plants have poor vigor, will not bloom well and may eventually die.

Tea scale will not go away by itself. Oil sprays are effective in controlling tea scale. Contact your local Extension Office for more information on the control of tea scale.

Camellias are part of our Southern gardening heritage. A few well-placed specimens will brighten up your landscape during the winter when few other shrubs are blooming.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

For additional information about all of the county extension services and other articles of interest go to: http://santarosa.ifas.ufl.edu

###