

This year Puxsutawney Phil was booed for declaring six more weeks of winter; it seems the dreariness of winter is affecting even the best spirited amongst us. Gardeners are often the hardest hit by long winters. Thoughts of spring flowers and greenery can sometimes make winter almost unbearable. If you and your garden both have the winter blahs, do something about it.

There is no reason a garden should be devoid of beauty this time of year. There are countless plant species that provide winter interest with their color, texture and shape. Some even provide showy flowers this time of year. One such plant is the *Camellia japonica*.

*Camellia japonica*, a native of China, Japan and Malaysia, is a slow growing, evergreen shrub that can grow up to twenty feet tall and has deep, glossy green leaves that provide interest to the garden year round. While its leaves are beautiful, the flowers of *Camellia japonica* are perhaps its best winter feature. Flowers range from white to pink to red, and are up to 5" wide. Flower shapes vary as well, with some favoring anemones, and others roses and peonies. Depending on variety, flowers are borne late winter to early spring. With over 3,000 varieties of camellia grown today, there is sure to be one with just the right color and bloom time to suit any gardener's needs.

The secret to successfully growing *Camellia japonica* is proper placement. Camellias require cultural conditions similar to those preferred by rhododendrons, azaleas and hollies. They are best suited for well-draining, acid soils with a pH between 5.5 and 6.0. Soils should be amended with compost prior to planting to ensure good drainage.

Choose a location that provides shade during the heat of the day. Too much sun will result in yellowing of the leaves. An ideal location is in the understory shade of tall pines. Also, as these plants flower during the winter months, they should be planted on the north- or west- side of a structure or wall so as to avoid early morning sun, which can too quickly warm the buds, making them more susceptible to frost damage when temperatures drop back down in the evening. Planting them near a structure will also help protect these broadleaved evergreens from drying winter winds.

When planting a camellia, be sure to place it so the crown is slightly higher than the surrounding soil. Water thoroughly and mulch. Camellias should be well watered until they become established and then they are generally quite drought tolerant. Be sure when watering to do so deeply, to encourage these normally shallow rooted plants to develop deep root systems.

Maintaining camellias is relatively hassle free. They suffer from few insect pests and diseases, are light feeders, requiring little fertilization and rarely require pruning. Should pruning be necessary, it is best done in the spring after the plants have bloomed and before they set new flower buds.

If additional camellias are desired, they are easily propagated from semi-ripe cuttings taken in late summer through winter. Dip in rooting hormone to encourage root development.

Since 1200 BC when Koreans began using the camellia in wedding ceremonies as a representation of longevity and faithfulness, the camellia has been appreciated for its beauty in the winter garden as well as its drought tolerance and low maintenance needs. Cast away winter blahs by taking in the beauty of *Camellia japonica*.