

'Bob Hope' camellia puts on a great show Deep red flowers, lustrous foliage win over this skeptical gardener

Richard Schwarzenberger, Special to The Chronicle
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How appalling camellias can be, misshapen blocks of foliage infested with hundreds of buds that barely start opening before turning ugly shades of brown. "The awful pink one," Anna, a gardening friend, called one type of camellia seen all over town last winter, but

there's also the awful red one and the awful white one. Wizen flowers that manage to open without rotting cling to the bush through summer into fall and winter, persisting even as new buds form.

Of course, you could painstakingly pick them off and while at it, remove all the forming buds, since the flowers, even when free of petal blight, are often unlovely. After all this trouble, you may still be left with a shrub that was badly pruned once and has held a grudge ever since. Better to get out the saw, mutter your apologies and cut the thing down.

'Bob Hope' is not one of those. It is a *Camellia japonica* whose semi- double flower, deep red with stamens of gold, can reach 5 inches across. The flowers contrast brilliantly with the ruffled petals.

I first planted 'Bob Hope' about five years ago in a garden on upper Belvedere Street without having seen the flower other than pictured on the tag. The leaves were so dark green and lustrous that even if the flower turned out to be a dud the plant would be ornamental year round. I bought it despite its name. (I never understood Hope's appeal -- maybe it was a generational thing.) In fact, I bought two plants, both in 5-gallon containers and decked out in buds showing a promising sliver of deep red. The form of the plants was somewhat stiff but I figured they might grow out of that, like teenagers often do.

And they have. Both are now more than 4 feet high, with gracefully arching branches. Camellias generally do best out of strong sunlight, but even in this considerably shady spot, each year they produce a satisfying bounty of flowers so lush that they appear almost tropical, like hibiscus. Often I clip them and float them in a large, shallow bowl at the center of the patio table, a regal accessory to whatever color the sky is wearing.

I soon discovered another significant virtue of this camellia, almost too good to be true: When the blossoms get tired, they fall to the ground. Simple. If they don't, some gentle encouragement, a delicate shaking of the bush, does the trick.

'Taylor's Perfection,' a pink beauty, has this same willingness to leave when the party's over, a quality that separates winning camellias from also- rans. Most sasanqua camellias, whose flowers are generally single, have it. So does 'Freedom Bell,' another favorite.



Having decided that 'Bob' was lovable, in subsequent winters I sought him out in the rare local nurseries that have good selections of camellias, but for the next few years, he was in seclusion. I know I could have ordered him easily enough, but before I got around to it summer loomed and ... well, next year. And then he was back.

In one nursery I found a dozen, and immediately bought five, even without knowing where exactly I was going to plant them. Three, perhaps, would go in a garden I'd begun on the slope of Mount Davidson. Immediately I had second thoughts. Was I overdoing it? Isn't this the sort of red that overwhelms a small garden? Won't I soon get tired of it if I plant it everywhere?

One day, I was walking up 18th Street near Noe, on my way to the Castro Theatre, when a red camellia caught my eye. Newly planted with the pictured tag still attached, it was clearly one of the unlovelies, its exhausted blooms more numerous than the fresh ones. Another consumptive dame aux camellias. Even the new blooms were a lifeless red, like dried blood. I leaned over to read the tag and register the name, ready to file it away as one to avoid. Camellia japonica 'Bob Hope.'

How could one plant be so schizoid? I saw myself lifting the three already planted and restoring them to their pots, and thereafter, to the nursery, washing my hands of them. But then reason, or perhaps hope, kicked in. This poor thing was clearly recently planted, and its history is anyone's guess. Baked in the trunk, maybe? Force-fed like a goose destined for foie gras? It shouldn't even have been in flower yet. None of the ones in my gardens were.

Tranquility restored, I went to the movie. Afterward, on my way back down 18th Street, I didn't give the camellia another glance. It was simply a bad joke, something Mr. Hope was famous for.

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