

Beautiful winter blooms

Easy-to-grow, deer-resistant camellias love shade

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Camellias are a winning choice for home landscaping.

They are easy to maintain and fill an often difficult niche of shade close to the house and under the eaves of the roof.

They are also a perfect landscaping solution for areas that can't be protected from deer. In my experience, deer don't eat camellia flowers or leaves. That hasn't stopped them from eating every reachable leaf off the 'Cecile Brunner' rose behind the camellias, so I know they are grazing in the exact vicinity and do not consider the camellia food. How rare and wonderful.

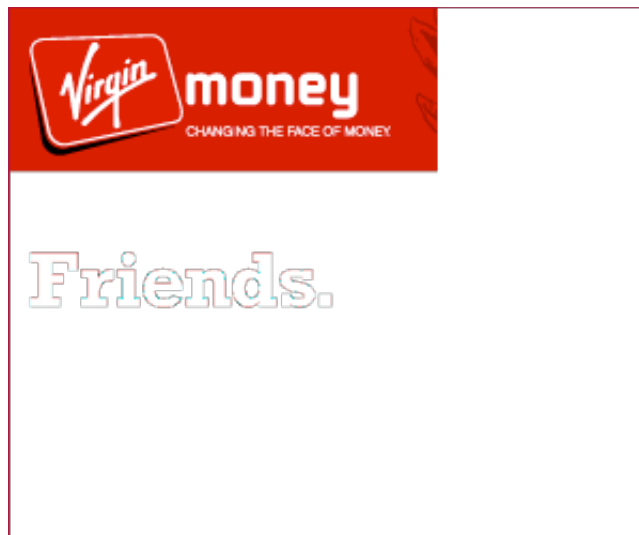
Camellias are among the first plants to bloom in my landscape after the short California winter. Late December is not unheard of, but January and February are more commonly the time for early varieties to burst into bloom. I find an abundance of buds in January, and by early February flowers begin to open. I am so anxious to have a flower to admire indoors that the camellias barely get to put on an outdoor show until they are in full flower. When I cut for flowers, I select blooms from the top branches of the plant. In this way, I am also pruning the camellia to control height.

In front of my house, planted about a foot from the exterior wall and well under the eaves of the roof, are two pink camellias called 'Nuccio's Cameo.' Their form is one of my favorites. Several layers of petals open and flatten concentrically, rarely showing stamens. The flowers have a symmetry that is soothing to my eye. This is an orderly camellia, unlike other forms that have more complexity.

They were part of my first all-pink landscaping project for the front of the house. Many plants with a variety of textures and qualities have come and gone, but the camellias are strong, look good and are thriving. That's why, despite the repetition, I have added three more this year.

They are midseason bloomers, 'Nuccio's Pearl,' a white flower with pink-rimmed outer petals, and 'Nuccio's Gem,' a perfect camellia with layer upon layer of white petals opening fully with no stamens, a white version of 'Nuccio's Cameo.'

This is a style of camellia flower I adore. The petals flatten as the flower opens and resemble a lotus or a



perfect mandala. The style of these japonica camellia flowers is called formal double. I call these two camellias my perfect pink and my perfect white flower. When I purchased the 'Nuccio's Gem' at the Berkeley Horticultural Nursery, the salesman couldn't help but wax poetic about the beauty of the flower.

All of my camellias have come from the Berkeley Horticultural Nursery. It has the largest selection of any nursery I have found, and from mid- February through early March many camellias are in bloom for a connoisseur's selection.

On the east side of my home, recently constructed and in need of a floral covering, I planted six camellias so close that their branches and flowers intermingle. The colors and forms I selected all harmonize. One is a japonica 'Buttons 'n' Bows,' a pale pink flower with star-shaped petals. One is a peony form with ball-shaped buds and powder-puff flowers, white with a red-pink edge on the outer petals, japonica 'Margaret Davis.'

Two are pink camellias with darker pink veins in the petals and star- shaped flowers, a hybrid cultivar, possibly 'Milo Rowell.' In this dense planting, the camellias are 3 feet apart. They have been in since 2000 and I have kept them pruned for low lateral growth. I imagine a camellia hedge with three different flowers.

Camellias need a slightly acid soil; otherwise, typical preparation for them is a mix of site soil, acid and humus-rich compost, and some nutritious amendments. After they finish flowering, I feed them a commercial plant food designed specifically for acid-loving plants. I also prune and shape my camellias after they have bloomed, to keep them tidy and dense. Camellias will grow into trees as they age, but I hope to keep mine low-growing and full of foliage.

The camellias I have selected are flowers of elegant symmetry and soft colors set off by the rich dark green of their leaves. They stand out in a landscape and add beauty to it at a time of year when floral color is hard to find.

As cut flowers, they are long lasting and simple to arrange. Two or three stems with full open flowers and a stem with a bud, all set off by glossy, dark green leaves, make a lovely grouping for a narrow-necked vase.

I also use a Japanese ceramic cube-shaped vase with a metal spiked frog for ikebana flower arranging. Camellias are a perfect ikebana flower with their woody strong stems to hold them up and their leaves to set off the flower form.

I recently attended the San Francisco Peninsula Camellia Society's 44th annual show at the San Francisco Botanical Garden's County Fair Building. It was a pure flower-lover's delight. The tables, with the multitudes of camellias all exhibited singly in short cups, looked like a presentation of floral cupcakes.

I was elbowed out of the way by the judges, as they crowded around a grouping of camellias. They, like I, were there to enjoy the flowers at their freshest. The final winners were camellias of great size, variety and color. All reflected the growers' love for this most hybridized and elegant flower.

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2005/03/09/HOGOJBLDVH1.DTL>

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