Pity the poor camellia. It’s one of the most misunderstood flowering shrubs in Southern gardens. Although Camellia japonica and its cousin, Camellia sasanqua, make exquisite foundation plantings, gardeners – especially novice ones – often approach this genus with trepidation.

Camellias thrive in nearly every type of situation except two. It will not thrive at the seashore, even when planted in protected places. And perpetually soggy soil eventually sends it to the compost pile. However, if azaleas thrive in your garden, you should have equal success with camellias.
Although the species name *japonica* suggests a Japanese heritage, it is indigenous to China. When Westerners discovered it thriving in Japan’s 18th-century formal gardens, they had no idea that japonica had been imported from China thousands of years before.

Nine out of 10 camellia species come from the mountainous coastal regions of southwestern Canton and Shanghai. Longitudinally, this also encompasses an area that extends roughly from Jacksonville, Fla., to Havana, Cuba. Throw in an adjustment for cooler, high-altitude temperatures, and it’s easy to understand why japonica and sasanqua feel at home in the Carolinas’ temperate weather, oppressive summer heat and smothering humidity. It also makes sense that America’s only commercially grown tea (*C. sinensis*) is cultivated outside of Charleston. (If you’ve ever wondered why we call this beverage “tea,” it’s because its original genus name was *Thea*.)

Although no one is exactly sure when or who introduced camellias into the Western hemisphere, Carolus Linnaeus, the founding father of scientific plant nomenclature, named this genus after George Joseph Kamel, a Jesuit missionary who also collected plants. Of course, Linnaeus insisted upon Latin monikers, so Kamel became Camellus.

After England expanded trade with China during the late 1700s, camellias began making their way into the South Carolina Lowcountry. Coveted for its mature height (usually 6-12 feet), shiny dark green, serrated leaves and six diverse flower shapes, *C. japonica* became the supreme accoutrement for Southern aristocratic gardens. Also prized for its robust durability, one cultivar exemplifies this species’ remarkable traits.

Sometime around 1830, the great-great grandson of John Drayton, patriarch of one of Charleston’s first planter-class families and original owner of Magnolia Plantation, added two ‘Alba Plena’ to the garden’s already extensive collection of plants. Throughout the mid-1930s to late 1960s, Drayton’s descendents cultivated camellia and azalea cuttings taken from the plantation, offering them for sale across the country through an enterprise named Magnolia Nurseries.

[Image of ‘White Empress’ camellia showing off large, semi-double blooms in early to midseason.]

[Image of ‘Lucille Jernigan’ camellia showing an unusual flower shape called “anemone-form.” The rather flat outer petals serve as a foil for the ruffled centered cluster of stamens and petaloids.]
‘Alba Plena’ was introduced to England from China in 1792, and planted at Magnolia Plantation around 1830. It blooms early to midseason.
Both ‘Alba Plena’ plants still live on the original property, now known as Magnolia Plantation and Gardens, thanks in part to the diligence of horticulturalist Tom Johnson, Magnolia’s director of gardens, and of Miles Beach, director of the plantation’s camellia collections and secretary of the American Camellia Society.

According to Beach, the larger of the two original ‘Alba Plena’, which is now a tree-like shrub and almost 4 feet in circumference, might have once been used for the commercial propagation. “There are extensive records of Magnolia Nursery selling ‘Alba Plena’, but whether any of them actually came from that plant is speculation,” Beach says. “However, all of the rooted cuttings came from the plantation’s nursery collection, so some probably did come from that plant.” He therefore believes that it’s safe to say that many ‘Alba Plena’ still growing in Charleston came from Magnolia. He also points out that this cultivar continues to win at many camellia shows.

Camellias are best planted in fall and winter so the roots can grow throughout the cool season.

- Sasanqua blooms in the fall and does better than japonica in full sun. It also will stand poorer soil conditions than japonica.
- Although japonica tolerates shade, it always does better with more sunlight. Midday sun is okay, but only if the camellia is protected from hot afternoon sun.
- Filtered light is best. In deeper shade, although it might live, camellias will not typically grow much.
- Prune and fertilize camellias in spring right after flower drop. Camellias continue to grow until July, when they go dormant and set buds for the forthcoming season.
- Overpruning and too much nitrogen in autumn cause camellias to lose buds.
- A healthy camellia will have insect problems because it produces “sugars” that attract hungry pests, such as tea scale. Expect rapidly growing youngsters to have more problems than older ones.
- Consult the American Camellia Society’s website, americancamellias.com, for further information.

\[\text{Camellia sasanqua ‘Texas Star’ starts flowering sometime between Halloween and Thanksgiving. While most plant tags estimate its height at 8-10 feet, some take on a tree form and grow several feet taller when mature.}\]
Of course, most gardeners aren’t concerned with awards or setting horticultural records. They just want to keep their camellia investment thriving. Johnson offers this advice for wary first-time buyers: Japonicas are grouped according to their bloom time – early, midseason and late. The problem is that midseason bloomers look great in the nursery and greenhouses in January where they are protected; however, once these plants are moved to less-sheltered environments, they tend to be damaged by the freezing temperatures. It’s best to avoid post-holiday impulse buying for midseason bloomers.

To extend the overall flowering from fall into spring, Johnson recommends selecting a mixture of all three groups, after some earnest research. The best way to approach this, he says, is to purchase camellias from a reputable source and not from a discount house. “You want a relationship with the nursery to obtain advice on growing your camellias,” Johnson says.

If you don’t already have some camellias in your garden, they’re a great addition for year-round interest. And if they’ve lived at Magnolia Plantation and Gardens for almost 200 years, it’s pretty likely they will survive in any garden in the Carolinas.

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