

Propagating Camellia

GCW Workshop, December 15, 10:00am

OVERVIEW

Camellia is likely the most well-known member of the Theaceae family. It is prized both for the beauty of its flowers, which can bloom from October to April, as well as the source of tea leaves.

Native to eastern and southern Asia, it is a relatively large genus with over 100 species, which has grown even larger with the introduction of many different cultivars. In the US, the primary species that are grown are *Camellia japonica*, *Camellia sasanqua*, *Camellia reticulata*, and hybrids from these species.

GROWING CAMELLIA

Camellia should be grown in moist, acidic (5.5 to 6.5 pH), loose, organically rich, well-drained soils in part shade. Consistent and even moisture is important. Avoid wet soils. Plants require protection from direct afternoon sun and wind. Best location may be sun-dappled part shade. Best with a root mulch. Near the northern parts of their growing range, plants should be sited in sheltered and protected microclimates such as near the south side of a home or building. Burlap wraps are sometimes helpful. Plants generally dislike changes in temperature, irregular watering or being moved. Even a change in humidity can cause plants to drop buds. Fertilize monthly in spring and summer. If desired, remove all but one bud from each cluster to increase the size of the flower. Prune immediately after flowering

SEED PROPAGATION

Unlike rooting cuttings, air-layering, or grafting, camellias grown from seed will not be exact duplicates of the camellias where they originated. All camellia seedlings will be at least slightly different from their parent plants. You never know exactly what its growth habit, bloom time, foliage appearance, or bloom will look like until it has begun to grow and mature. Raising camellias from seed is like raising children. They will all be different, and some will turn out better than others.

Seed pods on camellias begin to develop at the time of flowering after being pollinated by insects. At first the pod is small and may not even be noticed at all, but if it survives for a little while longer, you will likely notice the seed pods by late spring to early summer. Each seed pod will look different from the others and mature at different times depending on the species parentage.

Seed from *Camellia japonica* tend to mature sooner than many of the other species. Seed pods beginning to crack open in mid to late summer. Usually, when you see one or two seed pods beginning to crack open, you can pick all the rest of the seed for similar plants. If you see a few seed pods of *Camellia japonica* cracking open, make sure that the seed inside the pods are black. This is an indication that they are mature. If they are mature, you could safely pick the remaining seed pods on additional Japonica plants. The same would be said with seed from *Camellia sasanqua*. If you are not sure if the seed is mature, you can take a knife and cut into one seed pod to see if the seed is black and mature.

Camellia seed should not dry out so they need to be planted very soon after harvest or stored in the refrigerator. When seed pods are harvested, the pods need to be cut open with a knife to get to the seed or they can be placed in a dry area such as inside the house for a few days. This will cause the pods to crack open allowing you to easily get to the seed. Seed pods can have one seed in a pod or many seeds in a pod depending upon what species or variety they come from. Seed from the same seed pod can turn out very different from each other.

There are many ways to germinate your seed once you have harvested them. You want the seed to be in a moist environment. In nature, the seed would fall off the plant when the seed pods would crack. These seeds would end up in the decaying mulch or soil under the plants. It is not uncommon to see small seedlings growing under large camellias. In planting the seed, you want to mimic the natural conditions that would be found if you were not involved. Natural compost, planting soils, peat moss, and sphagnum peat moss are just a few of the mediums that could be used for germination.

Some seed growers soak their seeds overnight before they plant them. The idea behind this is to see which seeds sink and which seeds float. If a seed sinks, it is very likely that it will germinate. If a seed floats, it may turn out

to be a seed shell that is empty and will likely not germinate. This soaking may help to get moisture in the seed and begin the spouting of the seed.

One approach is to fill a container with growing mix or sphagnum covering the seed slightly, keep the container moist, and then separate the seedlings after they germinate. Each seedling can be potted in individual containers or planted in the ground. This is a simple way to germinate seed.

If you can't plant the seed immediately, you can store the seed in a refrigerator for up to four years. Many times, the seed will actually begin germinating in the refrigerator after a period of time. If you want to store seed, wrap your seed in a damp but not wet paper towel and place them inside a food storage bag. You can write any information such as seed parent or date harvested on the bag itself. Seal the bag and place it in the refrigerator until you are ready to plant the seed.

Once the seed have germinated, transplant into containers or outside. Cutting off the tap root will produce a more fibrous root system and is helpful if planting in a container. If planted outside the tap root will help the plant survive during periods of drought or severe cold. Better germination will occur when seed are planted immediately upon ripening.

Seedlings require much patience. It may take a little as three to four years or as much as ten to twelve years for your seedlings to mature and bloom. You never know exactly how they will turn out, but the anticipation is one of the most exciting things about growing seedlings.

CULTIVARS/HYBRID VARIETIES

***Camellia japonica* 'Kumasaka' (Mrs. Hill's Camellia)**

'Kumasaka' has rose pink, peony form, double blooms that are displayed against glossy, dark green foliage. This is an older variety of camellia with good cold hardiness.



***Camellia sasanqua* 'Northern Exposure'**

With its delicate single white blooms and dark green glossy foliage, this cultivar is hardy to Zone 6. It is medium-sized with an upright habit and excellent disease resistance. Protection from winter wind is also helpful, but winter sun is actually more damaging than wind.



***Camellia* × *hiemalis* 'Kanjiro'**



This hybrid camellia is a cross of a Sasanqua camellia and the more old-fashioned and late-winter-to-early-spring-blooming Japanese camellia. Because of this, 'Kanjiro' blooms slightly later than the other sasanquas. 'Kanjiro' has some of the best traits of both of its parents. Lovely cerise pink semi-double flowers

contrast well against dark green foliage. These blooms are more reminiscent of a Japanese camellia. However, the flowers drop off the plant after blooming, making it a tidier and cleaner plant year-round than other Japanese camellias. A Zone 7 camellia, it needs to be planted in a protected location, avoiding exposure to afternoon sunlight and winter winds.

***Camellia* × 'Winter's Star'**

This *Camellia oleifera* hybrid released by the U.S. National Arboretum is cold hardy to zone 6b. Single, violet-pink blooms appear over a period of four to six weeks in autumn, creating a stunning contrast to the dark green, glossy foliage. The self-cleaning petals eliminate the task of dead-heading.

