

Cold-Hardy Camellias— Gardening on the Esoteric Edge

by Harriet Monshaw

AT A RECENT LECTURE, Allen Lacey, plantsman, author, and the guiding light of Linwood, NJ's new vest-pocket arboretum, mentioned having planted *Camellia oleifera* 'Lu Shan Snow'. I wish he had consulted me first, even though my knowledge of camellias is limited. I would have said, "Forget Lu Shan, try another white camellia"—more about Lu Shan later. A buzz sounded in my brain—time for an article on camellias so that others don't go astray.

Background

The genus was named by Linnaeus in honor of George Kamel (1661–1706), an Austrian Jesuit missionary to the Philippines and botanist. However, two German physicians working in Japan, Andreas Cleyer in the 1680s and Engelbert Kaempfer in the 1690s, were the first to describe the plant in their writings. The genus *Camellia* is in the tea (*C. sinensis*) family Theaceae and is native to southeastern Asia. North American genera in that family are *Franklinia*, *Gordonia*, and *Stewartia*.

Ornamental camellias have been cultivated for centuries in China and Japan. They were imported to England about 1740; United States, 1780; and France, 1820 (Camille... "she was never seen with any flowers but camellias," Dumas 1848). These countries began hybridizing—primarily using *C. japonica*. But, it was not until the 1960s that cold-hardy camellias

were seriously bred. The two most well known American hybridizers are Dr. William Ackerman of Ashton, MD, at the U.S. National Arboretum, and Dr. Clifford Parks of Chapel Hill, NC, at the University of NC.

There are fewer than 100 cold-hardy cultivars currently in the trade reliable in zone 6b (0° F). Most are hybridized using the following species: *C. japonica*, *C. oleifera*, *C. saluenensis*, and *C. sasanqua*. The cultivars *C. oleifera* 'Plain Jane' and *C. oleifera* 'Lu Shan Snow' are often one of a hybrid's parents. The former is the hardier of the two.



Camellia oleifera 'Lu Shan Snow'

Cold-hardy camellia cultivars are usually grouped into blooming periods: **fall-bloomers**, October-January; and **spring-bloomers**, March-May. (In February, plants and people wisely go on vacation.) I prefer the fall/winter blooming camellias. They bloom when most other shrubs are snoozing—besides I have enough going on in spring.

Characteristics

Most hybrids are upright, reaching 6'+. I've read there is a globose shape, but I haven't met any roly-poly ones yet. The plant resembles a large-leaf evergreen rhododendron but with narrower leaves and single flowers. The leaf is evergreen, leathery, and lustrous, ilex-like with partially serrulate margins, 2–3" long by 1–2" wide. The flowers are 2–4", fragile, shattering easily. Flower forms can be single, double, anemone, peony, rose form double, and formal double; it's a progression of converting stamens and/or the pistil into petaloids. I prefer the flower forms that have "effective" stamens—let the boys have their day. Flower colors are white, pink, and red. (Camille's preferred color was white except for five days of the month when they were red—nothing like alerting the customers to when the shop was closed.) The flowering is often so profuse that the shrub appears almost out of place in the early winter/early spring landscape.

Which brings me to the plant's roots. While the plant may resemble the rhododendron genus in culture, habit, and relative intolerance to dense root competition, it differs in that it develops a taproot. This might explain its ability to withstand some drought and heat better than rhododendrons. Moreover, camellias, thankfully, do not succumb as easily to the wilt/root rot

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as the rhododendrons do in my present garden—nothing more unsettling than watching a slow death. Thus, camellias fit nicely into a suburban landscape that might not tolerate rhododendrons. To paraphrase Marie Antoinette, if you can't grow rhododendrons, grow camellias.

That's the good news. The bad news is—most blooms freeze, brown, and turn to mush at about 32° F. Some hybrids have immature buds that will remain closed at subfreezing temperatures, then open when the temperature moderates.

Culture

Camellias, though not related to rhododendrons, have a similar culture: moist, well-drained, acidic soil (pH 5.5–6.5), part sun (4 hours/understory), and well mulched.

Siting is important—nothing is easy. Before my first foray into camellias, I read the literature: N or NW preferred but shelter from drying cold winds; not S or W due to sun issues; not E if exposed to morning sun during a freeze—the sun on glossy leaves might produce a rapid change of temperature which could cause tissue damage. Perplexed, I followed the path of least resistance by placing my two new camellias in an available space—a NE nook about 4' from the house's brick wall. This site protected them from the S and W. They were protected from the north wind by a huge *Rhododendron* 'English Roseum'. I had to prune the rhododendron to squeeze them in.

When to plant is also critical. Charles Cresson of Swarthmore,



Camellia 'Autumn Spirit'

camellia aficionado and hybridizer, plants in late April but transplants before April 1. Randy Kobetich of Chester and Rehoboth Beach, American Camellia Society speaker and show judge, favors the day he plants his tomatoes. Both agree growth may be stunted if planted in the fall. Martine Cusden of Camellia Forest Nursery says mid-spring planting is preferred because most camellias are shipped from the South and have already broken dormancy. If a frost occurs, the new growth might be destroyed. She continues, if planted in the fall, when many northern garden centers stock camellias, the broad-leaved evergreen hasn't



Camellia 'Ashton's Snow'

enough time to establish itself to endure the rigors of our winter. All agreed to *not* making a purchase until spring. If that's not possible, the new plant can be kept in a lighted, cool garage (45° F maximum) until ready to plant.

Practical experience

When I moved to a new home and garden five years ago, my two camellias moved, too. I placed them NE about 6' from a solid fence protecting them from the northwest wind next to an *Ilex aquifolium* 'Argenteomarginata' (Variegated Holly) in my white garden. *C.* 'Winter's Interlude' (*C. oleifera* 'Plain Jane' x *C. sinensis rosea* 'Pink Tea'), an Ackerman hybrid, pinky lavender, anemone (bloom time 11/15-12/31+) didn't survive the transplant—I moved and transplanted in December. *C.* 'Autumn Spirit' (*C. oleifera* x *C. sasanqua*), a Parks hybrid, bright deep pink, peony (10/15-12/15+), however didn't drop a leaf. Siting correct; landscaping incorrect. Every time I went out my front door in the fall, there was this bright magenta flowering shrub staring me in the face when the entire world

is orangey and gold. Talk about tender sensibilities. I banished her to the rear of my garden, east facing about 8' from the house. Despite my lack of attention, she continues to grow and flower profusely—she certainly has "spirit."

What to do? I wanted a white camellia near my variegated holly, white fruiting callicarpas, and white anemones. I planted *C. oleifera* 'Lu Shan Snow', white, single (11/1-1/15) and *C.* 'Ashton's Snow' (*C. japonica* 'Billie McCaskill' x *C. oleifera* 'Plain Jane'), an Ackerman hybrid, white, double (11/1-1/30). The single blooms of 'Lu Shan Snow' are a disappointment. The flowers viewed close-up

look like silky fluttering butterflies. From my front door, they look like wet tissues—worse, they turn brown at 32°. The flower buds appear incapable of blooming when the weather warms. Cresson however sees other things in his 35-year-old Lu Shan—an impressive, handsome, showy bark. Unfortunately, I don't have 35 years to wait and see what my plant will look like when she grows up. Sorry, Charlie. In contrast to Lu Shan's performance, the double flowers of 'Ashton's Snow' look respectable even at 30° degrees; moreover, the flower buds bloom after ameliorating weather. Despite Lu Shan's shortcomings, I may keep her for historical reasons.

Spring bloomers

A few words about spring bloomers—basically *C. japonica*. In my area, Camden County, NJ, one sees lanky, 8'+, floriferous plants that are about 20–25 years old. I can only assume that these old cultivars are truly hardy as they have survived years of neglect and the vagaries of our weather. Most are sited N or E, sheltered near walls and among other shrubbery. None are exposed specimen plants.



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Habit for Rose Form, Double Flower

Unfortunately, none of the people who presently own these shrubs know the cultivars' names. (Time for cuttings?) A little judicious pruning and a mild balanced fertilizer might go a long way to fattening them up.

To experiment with spring bloomers, I planted *C. x williamsii* 'Aida' (*C. japonica* 'Ville de Nantes' x *C. saluenensis* 'Dogrose'), pink, rose form, mid-spring, and *C. japonica* 'Longwood Centennial', red, single, mid-spring. Both were recommended by Matt Taylor, research horticulturist at Longwood Gardens' camellia breeding program. *Note:* The name Aida means "returning" in Arabic; not the doomed opera heroine.

So what and where to buy

For a camellia genus overview, start with Dirr's *Manual of Woody Landscape Plants*; move on to Ackerman's article "Camellias for Cold Climates"; and finish with Ackerman's illuminating book, *Beyond the Camellia Belt: Breeding, Propagating and Growing Cold-Hardy Camellias*.

For fall/winter, I suggest 'Ashton's Snow' and 'Autumn Spirit'—even though she's a screamer, she has survived transplanting three times. Both Cresson and Kobetich recommend 'Winter's Star', pink, single (10/15–11/30), and globose 'Snow

Flurry', white, peony (10/15–11/30+). Cusden raves about semidwarf 'Winter's Rose', pale pink, formal double (11/1–12/15). For dependability, she likes 'Survivor', white, single (late fall/early winter), and 'Autumn Spirit'.

For spring bloom, Cresson rhapsodizes over 'April Remembered', pearly pink, large semidouble (3/1–4/30), and respects 'Spring's Promise' for its long blooming period, rosy pink, single (2/15–5/15). Kobetich prefers the more exuberant blooms of Parks' April series—in particular, 'April Dawn', pink/white variegation with a variety of color sports, formal double; 'April Kiss', rosy pink, formal double; and 'April Tryst', red, anemone. Just the names leave me breathless.

Cresson and Kobetich both suggested ultra hardy (zone 5b? with protection) 'Korean Fire', red, single (3/15–5/15), a PHS Gold Medal plant.

With all this new-found knowledge, I accidentally made my latest acquisition. While I was perusing pumpkins and chrysanthemums in a local garden center, I stumbled over compact 'Yuletide', red/conspicuous stamens, single, (11/1–1/30), and it fell into my shopping cart...now I need a "cool" garage. With this zone 7b cultivar, I might be over the edge.

Other selection tips:

- ⊗ flowering in mid-spring or early fall is less susceptible to danger from frost damage
- ⊗ darker blooms show less frost damage than paler colors
- ⊗ plump is good when it comes to camellia plant form
- ⊗ if landscaping, pay attention to blossom color and plant shape
- ⊗ do your homework (Ah, gee.)

A big box store's garden center had healthy, good-sized camellias for sale at a reasonable price. When I researched these cultivars, I found that they were not cold hardy in zone 6b.

Where to buy is a little easier

Try Waterloo Gardens, Devon or Exton, PA; Rare Find Nursery, Jackson,

NJ—the plants can be visited when in bloom; or Fairweather Gardens, Greenwich, NJ—but you know how they are—no exceptions to their mail-order-only rule except for a few visiting days in spring. Further afield, try Camellia Forest Nursery, Chapel



photo © Harriet Monshaw

Flower for Rose Form, Double Flower

Hill, NC—very knowledgeable. This nursery was established by Dr. Parks and his wife Kai Mei; it is now owned and operated by their son David Parks and Kai Mei Parks. I bought my first two camellias at this nursery on a trip to North Carolina with HPS/MAG in May 2001—a trip that still holds the HPS/MAG buying binge record to this day. We had to hire a truck to bring back the goodies.

Wherever, whatever, try a camellia or three. You know...that Marie Antoinette had a good head on her shoulders.



Harriet Monshaw writes horticultural and historical articles for various venues. She credits the following organizations: Barnes Arboretum, Rutgers Coop Extension of Camden Co. (Master Gardener), Longwood Gardens (Certificate Program), State of NJ Internal and External Audit (Yikes!—where she learned the fine art of investigation). Her interest in camellias, she says, came just when she thought she was ready for the coniferization/ossification of her garden—to paraphrase Gershwin, camellias "walked right in and drove the [conifers] away."

Ed Note: For a full-color version of this article, go to the HPS/MAG website, www.hardyplant.org. View the Ackerman articles online at the American Camellia Society, *Cold Hardy Camellias*, www.camellias-acs.com/display.aspx?catid=3,9,23&pageid=713, and at The International Camellia Society, *Camellias for Cold Climates*, camellia-ics.org/_ics/ackerm1.htm.