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*f* ILOLI

## GARDENER'S REFERENCE

# CAMELLIAS

*For much of the year, the deep glossy green foliage of Filoli's camellias provides lush backdrops and cooling canopies throughout the gardens. Over 286 distinct camellias grow at Filoli, from eleven different species. Many of them are 60 to 70 years old, planted under the direction of Mrs. Roth, who acquired many of her plants from the historic Domoto Nursery in Hayward, and from Nuccio's Nursery in Altadena. The majority of these specimens are from three species whose blooms overlap for a continuous display; Camellia sasanqua blooms from October through December, followed by C. reticulata and C. japonica from January through March. At their peak, shrubs and small trees are bursting with stunning displays in all shades of red, white, and pink.*

### General Care

Camellias are woodland plants, and grow best in part sun or dappled shade; direct, hot summer sun turns their leaves yellow. In arid California, camellias further benefit from water sprayed on their leaves to increase humidity within the canopy.

Camellias also thrive in rich, slightly acidic, well-drained soil that should be kept moist but not soggy. The majority of roots on these plants form a mat that crowd near the soil surface, so camellias are especially sensitive to water and nutrient levels in the uppermost layers of soil. To keep from burning their shallow roots, we use slow release fertilizers with low concentrations of nitrogen. Organic cottonseed meal works well, at a rate of two pounds per 100 square feet, four times per year. Our camellias are also mulched periodically with a layer of Filoli's homemade compost, to restore the soil grade, help maintain uniform soil moisture, and supply important micro-nutrients.

### Caring for Blooms

With the appropriate attention, our camellias reward us with long-lasting, full blooms, making springtime one of

the most labor-intensive times of year for camellia care. During the peak bloom from February through late spring, gardeners and volunteers spend many hours each week raking up dropped petals—both for aesthetics and to prevent disease. Moist, fallen petals can harbor camellia petal blight, a fungus that causes premature browning. This should not be confused with the effects of *Botrytis* blight, which also causes petals to brown and fade while still on the plant. In contrast to *Botrytis*, Camellia petal blight is characterized by a distinct, dark brown coloring of the petal veins.

Although we do not do so at Filoli, immature flower buds can be thinned—called disbudding—to produce fewer, larger blooms.

### Pruning

Flowers are all borne on new growth, so the optimal time to prune is during or right after bloom, when camellias are dormant. Our camellias generally receive a light pruning to remove crossing branches, dead, diseased, or damaged wood, and to thin or shape the canopy as needed. *Camellia reticulata* receive very little pruning because they do not sprout or recover readily.

JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
		C. japonica blooms Jan- Mar C. reticulata blooms Mar-May								C. sasanqua blooms	

*Camellia japonica* and *C. sasanqua* are useful plants with varied growth habits; they can be grown for formal and informal hedges, small specimen trees, wall shrubs, and as bonsai. In Japan, they are hedged hard and make magnificent blooming, formal hedges. At Filoli, camellias are pruned according to the desired form, and to allow light to penetrate the foliage. All cuts are carefully chosen to be as inconspicuous as possible; small stems are “drop crotched” back to a joint with another healthy stem or branch, and older wood is cut back to branches no less than 1/3 the diameter of the branch being removed. If this is not an option, then when possible other growth is encouraged to fill the space for a year or more before making a large, noticeable cut. The general Filoli philosophy is to leave a plant looking as though it hasn’t been pruned.

Although they make good foundation plants, camellias can grow so large as to block windows. It is essential to choose a site that can accommodate a camellia’s potential size, paired with a pruning regimen to keep control of a plant’s spread. At Filoli, we occasionally use renovation pruning to control the height of mature camellias, and to rejuvenate the canopy. This type of pruning involves large thinning and heading cuts into old wood on dormant plants. Camellias (*japonica* and *sasanqua*) can recover from this type of treatment.

### Camellias in pots

Camellias also make lovely additions to the garden when kept in containers. Their care is largely the same as for camellias in the ground, except that they may require a more vigilant eye towards their water and nutrient needs, and they should be

repotted on a regular basis. Leaving a two inch water well between the soil surface and the pot rim allows more thorough watering, to keep pots moist. Once a plant has reached its desired size, it is repotted every two to three years. The outer inch of roots and soil is removed, and another inch is gently loosened before the plant is tucked back into its pot with fresh soil. Younger plants that have not reached their desired size get repotted more often—up to once yearly—into a new pot no more than two to three times larger. The best time to repot is when the plant is dormant, or not putting on any new growth.

Container-grown *Camellia japonica* in Filoli’s nursery



### References & Further Reading:

- American Camellia Society. *Camellia Culture for Beginners*. Booklet available at: [www.camellias-ac.org/pubs/default.asp](http://www.camellias-ac.org/pubs/default.asp) Retrieved 29 May, 2007.
- Salyards, J. (2003). Camellias in Containers. *The Sundial Times*, 33, 1.

*Filoli Gardener’s Reference sheets are created by garden staff to answer common questions regarding Filoli’s traditional horticultural practices. This sheet may be accessed from the Filoli website.*

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