The American Rhododendron Society Members Worldwide

Rhododendron & Azalea News

Camellias: Companions for Fall and Winter Bloom

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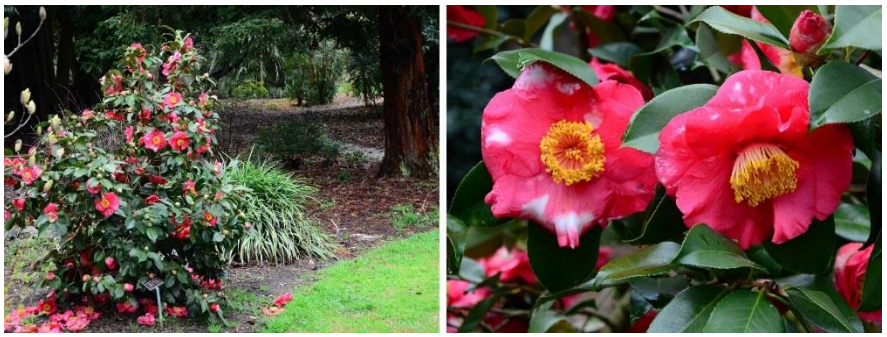
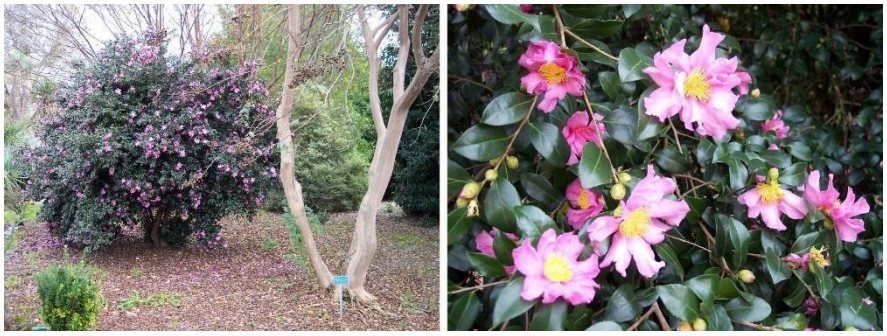
Potomac Valley Chapter ARS

There are not many rhododendrons that bloom in the fall and winter where I live in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. I have known some purists who insisted that if a plant was not a rhododendron, it was a weed. However, most of us include other companion plants in our landscapes, especially if they take the same growing conditions and will give color at other times of the year. Others apparently feel the same way. The Royal Horticultural Society has their Rhododendron, Camellia, and Magnolia Group, a single focus group of enthusiasts who share a common interest and information about these plants:

https://www.rhodogroup-rhs.org/



Spring Blooming *Camellia japonica* 'Reg Ragland'

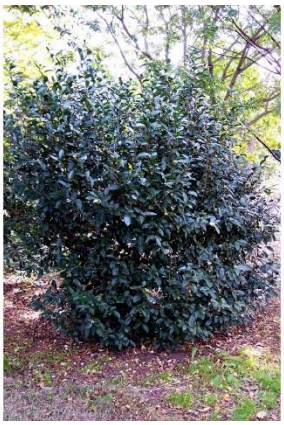


Fall Blooming *Camellia sasanqua* 'Cleopatra'

This article focuses on camellias with emphasis on the fall blooming cultivars. Camellias are native to parts of Asia including southern China and Vietnam and found their way to Europe in the early 1700s. They arrived in the United States later that century and became very popular in the southeast where the warm, humid climate made it hard to grow most rhododendron species other than evergreen azaleas. The first specimens introduced from the Orient were spring blooming selections of *Camellia japonica*. The fall flowering *C. sasanqua* varieties didn't arrive until the 1800s. Camellias became popular landscape plants for southern plantations where winters were not too severe. Hybridizers have now developed hardy hybrids that grow beyond that area we call the "Camellia Belt."

Spring flowering *C. japonica* hybrids

Fall blooming *C. sasanqua* hybrids


Camellia sinensis flower and plant

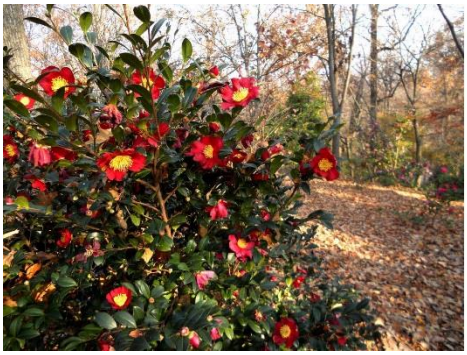
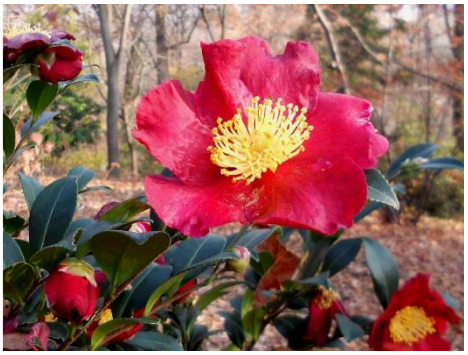
Camelia oleifera

Camellias were prized by many Asian cultures for centuries, long before making their debut in western gardens. Two fall blooming species have considerable commercial value beyond admiration of their floral displays. *Camellia sinensis* is the source of tea, a popular beverage around the world. The flowers are small but leaves are picked and dried to produce tea. Tea is a major commercial commodity with an annual production around 6 million tons, most if which comes from China and India. There are selections of the species but the greatest determinant for tea flavor is how the leaves are processed after they are picked.

The fall-blooming *Camellia oleifera* is also a tea camellia. Its leaves are not used to produce a beverage but its large seeds can be crushed to extract tea oil, a substance rich in anti-oxidants and prized for cooking and many other uses. The blossoms are larger than *C. sinensis* and it has also proven valuable in breeding since it is quite hardy and can pass that trait on to its progeny.

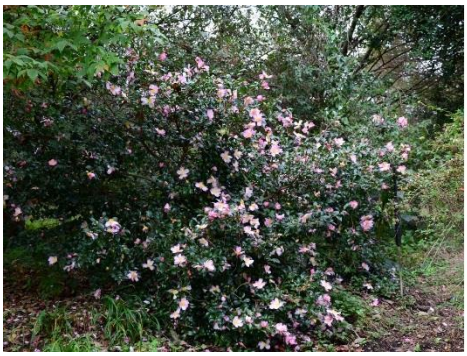
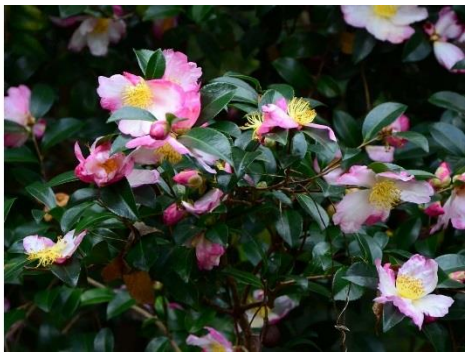
Camellia sasanqua hybrids

Most of this article will focus on the fall blooming hybrids of *Camellia sasanqua*. In general, plants of this species are hardy from Zone 7 to 9. They are very well adapted to the warm and humid climate of the Southeastern U.S. which is why they are landscape staples in many gardens.

Fall Blooming *Camellia sasanqua* 'Yuletide'

The variety 'Yuletide' has deep red blossoms and tends to flower quite late. If given a spot that can be protected from frost and freezes in December, the plant is often in peak bloom at Christmas time in many gardens. It is a compact grower and an ideal choice for an interior courtyard in mild areas.

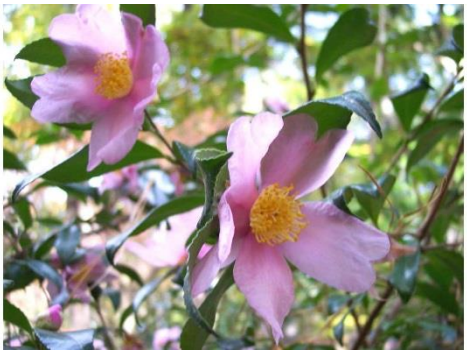
Camellia sasanqua 'Hana Jiman'

'Hana Jiman' is a lovely bicolor *C. sasanqua* variety that has white flowers edged in rose pink with a tuft of yellow stamens in the center of each blossom. It is one of the first to bloom in the fall in our region, typically opening in October before the first frost. With a bit of luck, it will be in flower throughout the cool days of November and will finished up in December before we get a hard freeze.

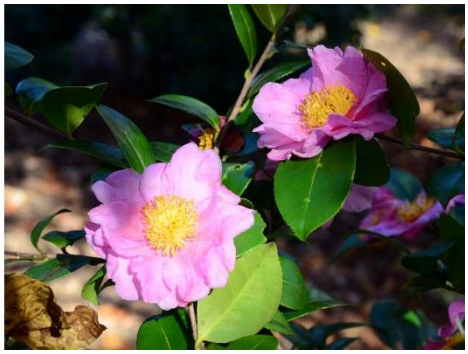
Image Gallery: Fall Blooming Camellias

The images below are some of the fall blooming *Camellia sasanqua* varieties we see in the Southeastern United States. Some may be only winter hardy in Zone 7b surviving lows of 5° F (-15° C) but others will take Zone 7a which can be as low to 0° F (-17° C). Washington, D.C., is in Zone 7b with some suburbs 7a which made us the northern limit for camellias. Due to recent erratic weather patterns, we can have Zone 8b winters (15° F or -10° C) or cold spells more typical for Zone 6a (-10° F or -23° C). In bad winters, many camellias were damaged or killed to the ground but that just inspired hybridizers to develop hardier forms.

C. saluense

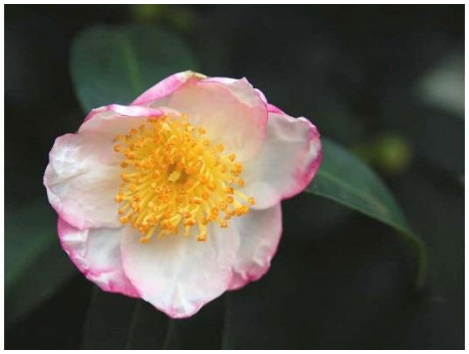


***C. sasanqua* 'Ashton's Pride'**



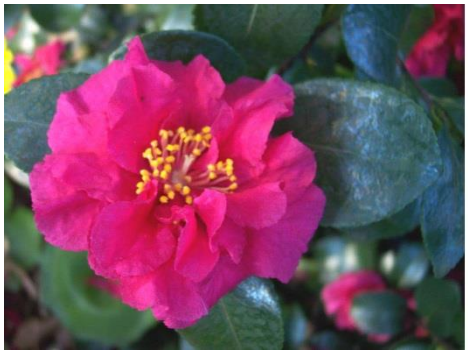
***C. sasanqua* 'Autumn Pink Icicle'**

C. sasanqua 'Daydream'

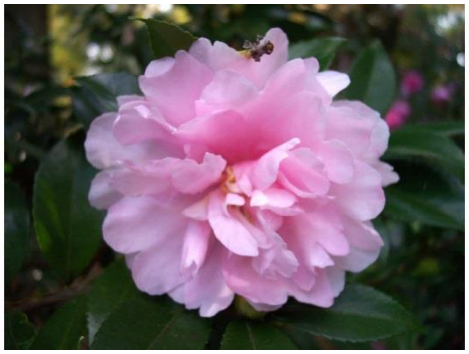


C. sasanqua 'Narumigata'

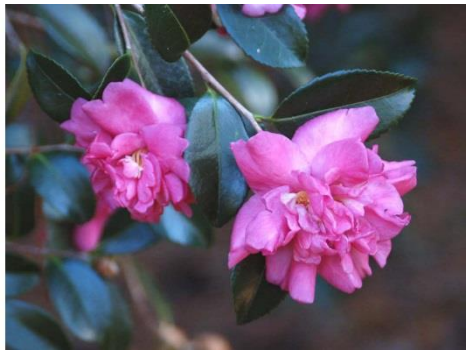
C. sasanqua 'Pink Butterfly'



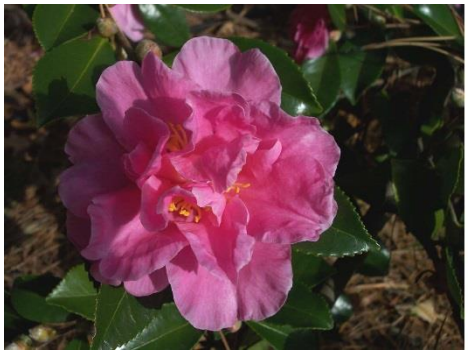
C. sasanqua 'Bonanza'



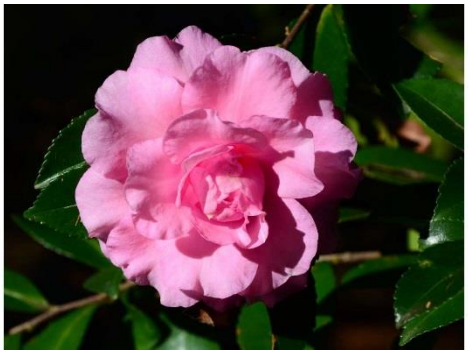
C. sasanqua 'Jean May'



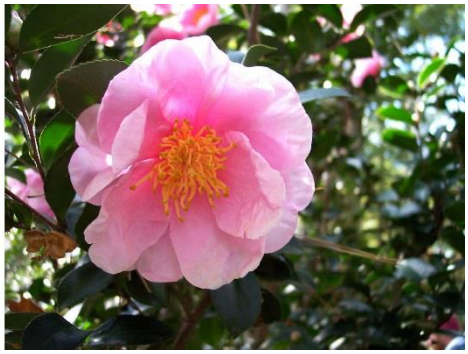
C. sasanqua 'Sparkling Burgundy'



C. sasanqua 'Sowa-no-Sake'



C. sasanqua 'Our Linda'



C. sasanqua 'Pink Goddess'

The Need for Hardy Camellias

The U.S. National Arboretum was just a few minutes away from where my grandparents lived in Washington, D.C. When we visited them as I did frequently in my childhood, I often begged someone to take me to the Arboretum to see the flowers. The magnificent original plantings of the Glenn Dale Azaleas set out by Ben Morrison in bloom each year is surely why I developed a lifelong interest in azaleas. Another stunning display at the Arboretum was their Camellia Collection. Some of the camellia specimens were huge, 50 years old or more. They towered over my head and I remember strolling through them admiring the blooms hanging down from above as well as the carpet of petals from shattered blossoms beneath.

Then Washington, D.C., had two brutal winters back to back, one in 1976-1977 and again in 1977-78. The evergreen azaleas survived but the Camellia Collection was totally devastated. Most of the large specimens were killed to the ground. The late Dr. William L. Ackerman, longtime curator of the collection. who I met through the Camellia Society, said they had 956 specimens in the collection. When he and his staff took inventory, only about a dozen selections of *C. japonica* survived. Only four *C. sasanqua* hybrids came through unscathed. One of about 30 species seemed to have no trouble with that winter. This plant, *C. oleifera*, would be key in breeding the next generation of hardy camellias.

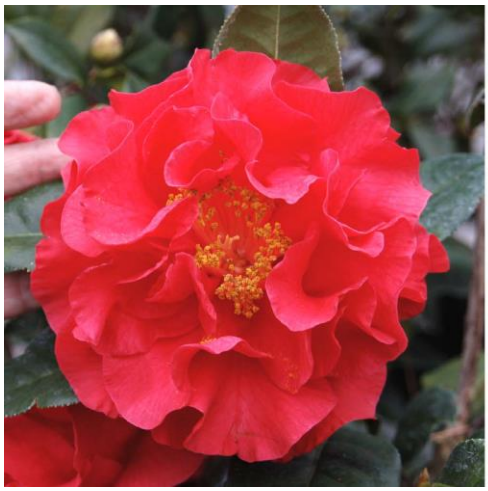
Rather than replacing all those lost cultivars, Dr. Ackerman began his mission. He crossed *C. oliefera* with a hybrid of *C. saluensis* and *C. japonica* called *C.* x *williamsii* 'November Pink'. That produced the 'Pink Icicle', my only spring flowering camellia to bloom after the "Polar Vortex" ravaged my garden. He crossed *C. oliefera* with *C. sasanqua* to produce hardy fall blooming camellias like 'Winter's Snowman'.

'Pink Icicle' (Zone 6b)

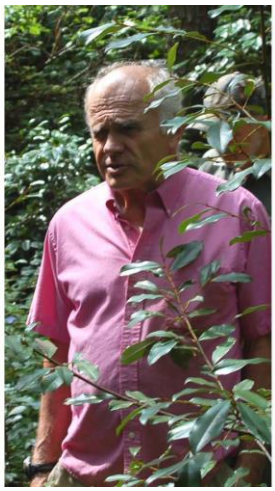
Dr. William Ackerman

'Winter's Snowman' (Zone 6b)

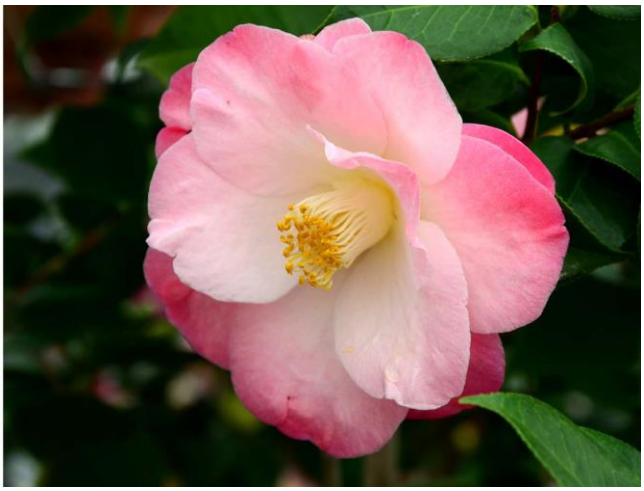
The late Dr. Clifford Parks, a professor at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, was working on improving the hardiness of camellias, too. He introduced many hardy *C. japonica* hybrids but he also used tender *C. reticulatum* to get very large flowered hybrids that could grow outside without protection.



'Dr. Clifford Parks' (Zone 7b)



Dr. Clifford Parks

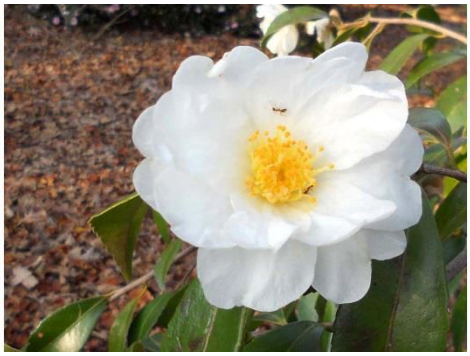


'April Remembered' (Zone 6a)

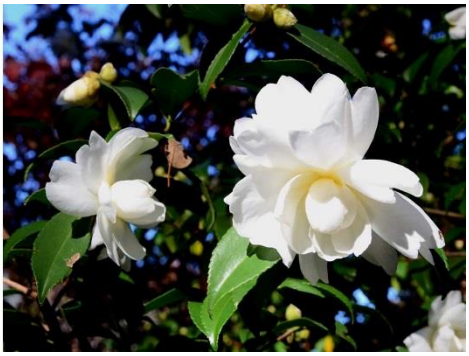
Image Gallery: The Hardy Ackerman Hybrids

For his fall blooming *C. sasanqua* hybrids, Dr. Ackerman often used *C. oleifera* for the other parent. It is important to note that species can vary quite a bit. He found that one of his *C. oleifera* seedlings was hardier than the others but the flowers were not quite as attractive. He called it 'Plain Jane' and used it frequently in crosses. However, that plant has proven hardy to -15 F (-26 C) and it passes those cold hardy traits onto its progeny. The following images show some of Dr. Ackerman's selections. Many of them do look quite similar but there are subtle differences in plant habit, flower shape, bloom time, and other qualities. Some of those traits do not show up in small plants, either.

White Ackerman Hybrids



'Polar Ice'

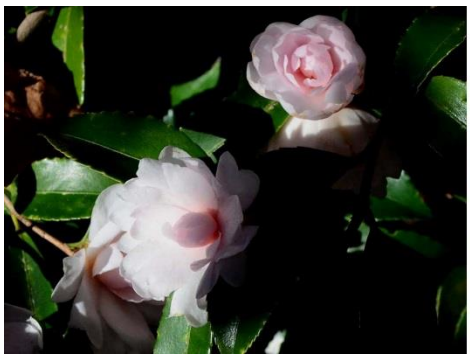


'Winter's Waterlily '

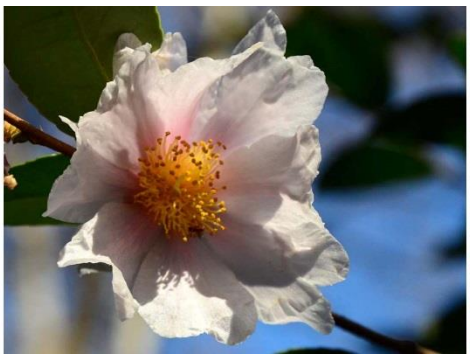
'Snow Flurry'

'Winter's Cupid'

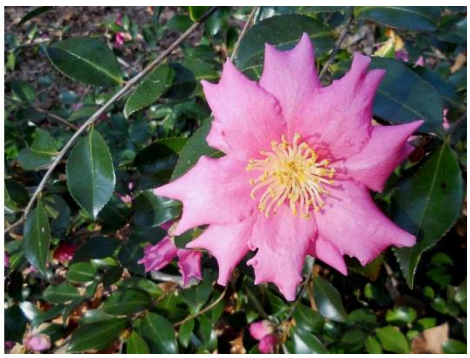
'Winter's Hope'



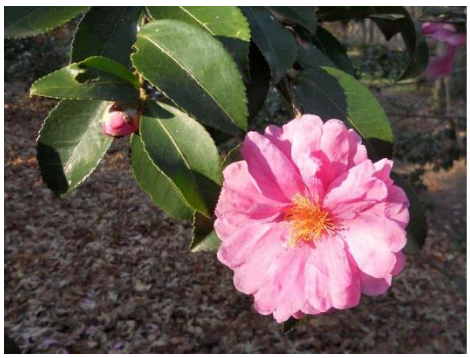
'Winter's Rose'



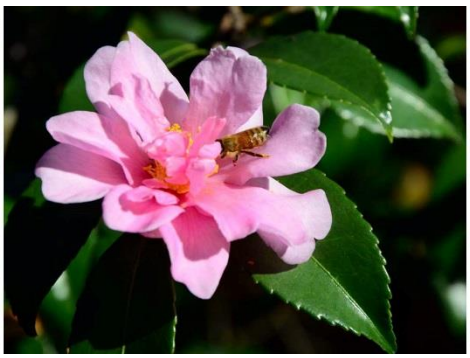
'Winter's Star'



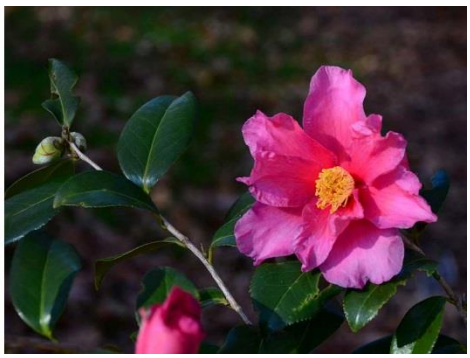
'Winter's Darling'



'Winter's Joy'



'Winter's Charm'

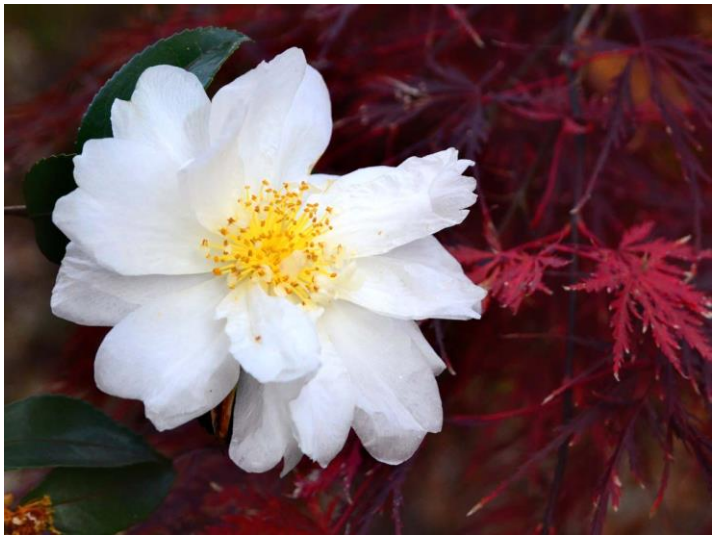


'Winter's Fire'

In his book, *Beyond the Camellia Belt* (Bull Publishing, Batvia, IL, 2007), Dr. Ackerman, stressed the need for continued exploration to discover additional winter hardy camellias that can be used in breeding. Barry Yinger who was a young plant explorer at the National Arboretum for a while, brought back *C. japonica* cuttings and seeds from an expedition he took to Korea. He grew out a large block of plants and one of those seedlings showed exceptional promise. It was a nice single red with a tuft of yellow stamens and has proved to be extremely tough, hardy in Zone 5. He named it 'Korean Fire'. Natural selection is still the best method to help find the hardiest forms. We don't know what breeders will be able to accomplish in the future. Perhaps they can create even hardier camellias to grace northern gardens. Maybe some hybridizers in our group who live in those colder regions will start experimenting with camellias, too.

It is clear that Dr. Ackerman's *C. sasanqua* hybrids are reliably hardy in Zone 6. For those of us who have been living on edge and lost plants when temperatures dropped so low during extreme weather conditions, we no longer have to worry about our fall blooming camellias. His plants are tough and have managed to survive a number of recent abuses that our region has seen because of climate change.

My garden is filled primarily with azaleas, rhododendrons, and companion plants. I have found room for other treasures, too. I try to find landscape groupings that make a statement. For instance, when 'Winter's Snowman' bloomed for the first time, I spied the delicately filigreed red foliage of my Japanese maple 'Garnet' putting on a fall show on the other side of the garden. I decided those three belonged together. In short order, the camellia was on its way across the garden so its white blossoms could contrast against the red leaves of the maple.



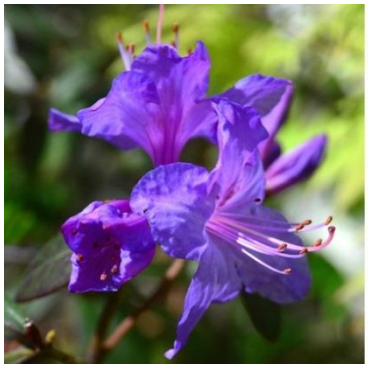
'Winter's Snowman' with Japanese maple 'Garnet'

If my plants could talk, I am sure they would complain that my garden is more like a perverse game of musical chairs. As soon as something blooms, there is a high probability that I will dig it up and move it somewhere else. Eventually, I either find a combination I like or else the plants get too big for me to move without getting a hernia.

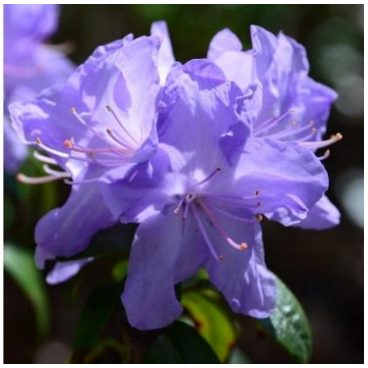
Below are some plants in one area where I focused on very early pinks, whites, and a touch of blue. Most of the plants are not noticeably fragrant but that viburnum is and perfumes the entire garden.

1. *Camellia* 'Pink Icicle', 2. *Viburnum* 'Mohawk' (very fragrant), 3. *Rhododendron metternichii* (*R. degronianum* ssp. *heptamerum*), 4. *Anemone nemorosa* (ground cover), 5. *R. adenopodum*, 6. Yoshino Cherry (*Prunus yedoensis*), 7. *Narcissus* 'Thalia', 8. *Magnolia* 'Sayonara'

I used to have a Blue Atlas Cedar backing up the camellia in that grouping but it died and would be too expensive to replace. In 2018, my garden received over 8 ft of rain (2.5 meters) during that season which was excessive to say the least. That evergreen as well as many of my rhododendrons couldn't take that much water. I do want to bring more blue into that landscape group and intend to add two more lepidote rhododendrons which are still in pots, 'Blaney's Blue' and 'Rhein's Luna'. Our summers are usually too hot for most of the blue lepidotes but these two hybrids do well for us.



'Blaney's Blue'



'Rhein's Luna'

In keeping with the theme about good companions with rhododendrons, I thought I would share another area where I have chosen a different color scheme. It brings in light yellow to blend with pinks and whites instead of blue. In late winter, I have two yellow witch hazels (Hamamelis) and a pink *Prunus mume* 'Kobae' with hellebores to lead off the season. As spring arrives and my lepidote rhododendrons and first evergreen azaleas begin to bloom, the planting shifts to the color scheme shown below. One focal point is the soft pink magnolia 'Daybreak' that blooms later than most and usually misses the last frost. That alone is reason enough to grow the plant. It was developed by the late Dr. Augie Kehr, a good friend and mentor. The other tree is a red selection of our native Red Bud, *Cercis* 'Appalachian Red'. It was discovered by another friend and early chapter leader, Dr. Max Byrkit. I have a small garden so I like to surround myself with attractive plants that have the added bonus in that they remind me of good friends.

As the season progresses, other rhododendrons, midseason evergreen azaleas, deciduous azaleas and companion plants take center stage. I will try to share some of those plants in future issues.

1. *Rhododendron* 'Kehr's White Ruffles' (backed by 'Olga Mezitt', 2. Glenn Dale Azalea 'Dayspring',
3. Glenn Dale Azalea 'Festive', 4. *Magnolia* 'Daybreak', 5. *Camellia japonica* 'Lemon Glow'
6. Haag's '24 Karat', 7. *Cercis canadensis* 'Appalachian Red', 8. *Corylopsis pauciflora*