

Your garden in April

Camellias - in the pink

With their glossy evergreen foliage and their beautiful, waxy blooms, camellias bring an exotic, tropical feel to the spring garden. Indeed when they were first introduced to western gardens, it was thought that they needed the warmth of a greenhouse to survive. Now we know that they are remarkably hardy, although they should not be planted in an east-facing position where the morning sun on frosted blooms can spoil the flowers.

With their evergreen foliage they are extremely versatile, whether in a woodland garden, as a hedge or as a specimen in a container. They generally require little in the way of pruning, and the glossy darkness of their leaves makes an excellent backdrop for summer flowers.

Camellias originate from China and Japan where they grow in woods. They are therefore tolerant of shade and look most at home in a woodland setting. They require an acid soil (pH 6.5 or lower) which is rich in organic matter. Think of a woodland floor with dark, moist and crumbly soil, created from years of leaf litter. Camellias are quite shallow-rooted and therefore can suffer from drying out if the soil does not hold the



moisture. Add in as much organic matter as you can find (leaf mould is best). If your soil is not acid, then camellias perform well in a container with ericaceous compost. Keep the compost well-watered (but not waterlogged), particularly in the summer months as this is when the buds are forming for next year's flowers. Dryness at this crucial time can cause bud-drop later.

Cultivars of *Camellia japonica* are the greatest in number, but the *Camellia x williamsii* hybrids perform better in less than ideal situations. They bloom better in deep shade and in poorer, drier soil; they are more tolerant of exposure to

sun and wind; they drop their spent flowers naturally so don't need deadheading; and will perform better than *C japonica* if your soil is around pH 6.5, provided you add lots of leaf mould.

Most *williamsii* hybrids are pink, and recommended cultivars include: 'Bow Bells', 'Donation', 'Anticipation', 'Debbie', and 'Water Lily'. White and cream cultivars include: 'Jury's Yellow' and 'China Clay'.

Get the conditions right, and camellias will reward you with years of reliable, exotic blooms to brighten up your early spring garden.