

How to Plant a Beautiful Camellia

Submitted by: Richard Buggeln

So you purchased a beautiful camellia from a local nursery or at the recent plant sale of the Tidewater Camellia Club. It looks nice in the pot, but at some point to ensure that you continue to get those beautiful blooms, you will need to plant it in the ground.



THERE ARE SEVERAL THINGS TO CONSIDER BEFORE YOU PLANT A CAMELLIA.

- When should I plant a camellia?
- Where should I plant a camellia?
- What do I need to do to the soil before I plant my camellia?
- How do I plant a camellia?

WHEN TO PLANT: The first question is easy to answer. As with most everything in hot, humid North Carolina you definitely do not want to plant in the heat of the summer – April through September. Whenever you plant anything, the plant undergoes a lot of stress. The heat of summer is just one more major stress factor that you can avoid by planting in the time period from early fall through late winter. During this time period, the roots will grow into the native soil, preparing for the heat of the upcoming summer. It is rare for the soil to freeze in the Cape Fear Region, so unless there is a cold snap in the winter, you have about five prime months to plant. If there is a very cold stretch just wait a few days until things warm up a bit.

WHERE TO PLANT: Where to plant a camellia depends on which type of

camellia you have purchased. There are primarily two types of camellias that are sold in the Cape Fear Region.

- *Camellia japonica* – Winter Blooming & Shade Loving
- *Camellia sasanqua* – Fall Blooming & Sun Loving

When most people in this area talk about a camellia they are referring to a *Camellia japonica*. This is the winter blooming variety which has a large leaf and bloom. As with most plants, if the leaf is larger, the plant needs less sun. *Camellia japonica*s need filtered sun light or dappled shade. The preferred location for planting camellias is under pine trees or live oaks. If some sun is unavoidable, morning sun is preferable to afternoon sun as the afternoon sun is more intense.

The fall blooming *Camellia sasanqua* has smaller leaves and smaller more numerous blooms and prefers full sun. The blooms appear along a branch, unlike *japonica* blooms which tend to bloom on the tips of branches. When *Camellia sasanqua* is planted in the shade, the number and size of the blooms will be much smaller.

If you live on the inter-coastal waterway, you should not plant your camellia on the water side. Camellias do not like salt. In addition, the winds from the water tend to dry out both the plant and sometime the buds. If the buds get too dried out, they will not open.



WHAT SHOULD I DO TO MY SOIL; Contrary to popular opinion, camellias are not strongly acid-loving plants like azaleas and blueberries. The recommended pH for camellias is 5.5 – 6.5, slightly acidic. A neutral pH is 7.0 – neither acid nor alkaline. In the Cape Fear Region, as in most regions that have heavy rainfall, the soils tend to be acidic, in some cases as low as 4.0. With a pH this low, the absorption of micro-nutrients by camellias is high and in some cases, can be toxic to the plant.

The first thing to do is to get a soil test. Go to the New Hanover County Arboretum, pick up a FREE soil testing kit, follow the instructions and bring the soil sample back to the Arboretum. They will send it off to Raleigh and in 4 -10 weeks (depending upon the time of the year) they will email you your test result. This will include fertilizer requirements and the amount of limestone required to obtain what North Carolina thinks is the correct pH for camellia. Unfortunately, North Carolina thinks that a proper pH for camellias is 4.8 or less, so their recommendation does not conform to the America Camellia Society recommendation of 5.5 – 6.5. The test report, however, does give you the measured pH and so you can use the simple formula:

To raise the pH of sandy soil by $\frac{1}{2}$ pH add 4 pounds of limestone per 100 feet² area

Suppose your test sample comes back with a pH of 5.0 and you want to raise your pH to 6.0. Then you would add limestone at the rate of 8 pounds per 100 feet², a 10 feet x 10 feet area. I suggest that you use pelletized limestone as it is absorbed into the soil much faster and does not have the dust associated with ground limestone. The cost of pelletized limestone is only marginally greater than that of ground limestone. Because we live in a coastal area, the soils tend to be deficient in magnesium. Therefore, it is suggested that you use dolomitic limestone which contains magnesium. Expect the pH of your soil to rise slowly, achieving your target value after about a year. The pH will remain at your target value for a couple of years and then will slowly decrease, so you need to have your soil tested every few years. Most people will normally test their soil only after planting their camellia, so what is presented as step three in most cases will become step four.

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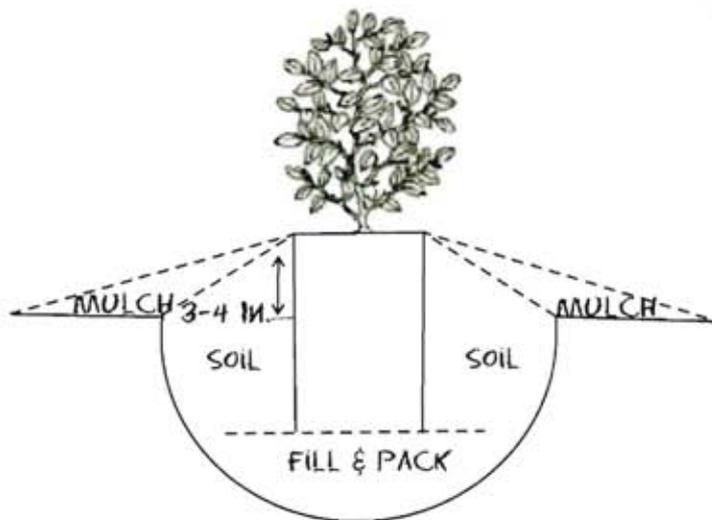
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HOW TO PLANT A CAMELLIA: Now that you have completed your preparations, you are ready to actually plant your camellia. These instructions come from Mark Crawford of Loch Laurel Nursery of Valdosta, Georgia, a grower of show quality camellias. This is a nine step process – see below figure:

- Dig hole wider and slightly deeper than container
- Remove the plant from its container by slowly tapping the top of the container
- Cut the roots of the plant – both sides and bottom if they are encircling the pot.
- Position plant 3-4 inches above grade
- Back-fill and pack soil
- Do not cover top of root ball with soil
- Apply mulch so that soil doesn't erode from root ball
- Keep well-watered the first year
- Spray with dormant oil if needed for occasional pests and tea scale



When digging the hole, it is easier to put the soil in a wheel barrow. If the soil is very sandy add peat moss or composted cow manure and maybe a little limestone. The soil media in the pot is normally not compacted and will tend to sink over time. By planting 3" – 4" above grade, you are compensating for this situation. *The easiest way to kill a camellia is to plant it too deep.*

Enjoy your camellias and their beautiful blooms.

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