

Colorful camellias to start blooming soon

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Red is for Valentine's Day, and can also be for camellias! Valentine's Day is Monday, which means that camellias are just around the corner. Right now, in this cold and icy weather, it's hard to imagine that gorgeous red camellia blossoms will actually open next month (along with pink, and white, camellias). Camellias, among the earliest flowers to bloom, are certainly a welcome sight in late winter and early spring.

Camellias (*Camellia spp.*) are evergreen shrubs or small trees with glossy simple leaves, native to Asia. There are numerous species, hybrids and cultivars of Camellia; well-known species include

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the Japanese camellia (*C. japonica*), the Christmas camellia (*C. sasanqua*), and *C. reticulata*. Most camellias are red, pink, or white, but *Camellia chrysantha*, the golden camellia, has yellow flowers. The large, showy blossoms usually have no scent, but there are a few scented varieties.

The species typically have six to nine petals, and some of the cultivated varieties have double flowers. Most camellias bloom in late winter/early spring, but some varieties are fall-blooming. Due to the beauty of its flowers, *Camellia japonica* was named the state flower of Alabama.

Camellias generally thrive best in the mild climate of USDA plant hardiness zone 8, located in the southeastern U.S., and also the Pacific Northwest. Some camellias can grow in zone 9, where it is warmer. Some camellias are also hardy in zone 7, which is colder and includes Delaware. For Kent County, the hardiest camellias include varieties "Kumasaka" (introduced in 1896), "Berenice Boddy" (1946), and "Overlook White" (1961). Frost sometimes damages the flower buds.

A good place to plant camellias is in protected shaded locations, such as on the



The red flowers of this camellia beautifully complement the green stone building, located in Dover at the intersection of State and Division streets. This camellia is quite large, even

north side of buildings, or under tall trees like pines. Camellias prefer slightly acidic, moist, but well-drained, soil. They are sensitive to drought, wind, and leaf scald from direct sun. Exceptions are the "sun-camellias" (*C. sasanqua*), which can withstand afternoon sun, provided that they have adequate moisture.

Camellias are in the tea family (*Theaceae*). Tea, that popular caffeinated beverage, is made from the dried and oxidized leaves of the tea plant (*Camellia sinensis*), a close relative of the more ornamental camellias.

Camellias were first introduced to commerce in England, where new varieties were developed. Camellias were so popular in Europe in the 1800s that they inspired Alexandre Dumas to write a novel, "La Dame Aux Camellias" ("The Lady of the Camellias"), based on his real-life lover.

Delaware State University/Susan Yost though it's on the south, sunny side of the building; not generally a good location for most camellias. Camellias bloom early — this photo was taken on March 22, 2009.

This novel inspired Verdi to write his opera "La Traviata". Numerous plays and movies have also been based on the novel, with the tragic lead role played by famous ac-

tresses such as Sarah Bernhardt, and also Greta Garbo (in the film "Camille").

For more information about camellias, visit the website of the American Camellia Society <http://www.camellias-ac.org/default.aspx>. Camellia shows are listed for several states, including a show at the Norfolk Botanical Garden in Virginia, in March. One of the biggest camellia shows is in the Boston area, where most of the camellias have to be grown in greenhouses. Bellin-grath Gardens in Georgia is also known for its camellia show, which takes place in February.

Camellia-lovers can follow "Camellia Trails" of gardens in the U.S. The East Coast Camellia Trail starts in the south with gardens in Georgia, and ends in Massachusetts. In the vicinity of Delaware, the Camellia Trail includes Longwood Gardens and The Morris Arboretum in Pennsylvania, and the National Arboretum in Washington.

Happy Valentine's Day, and keep your eyes open for the first camellia flowers in Delaware!

On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call 857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost, Herbarium Educator) to arrange a tour of the herbarium, or for more information about this article.