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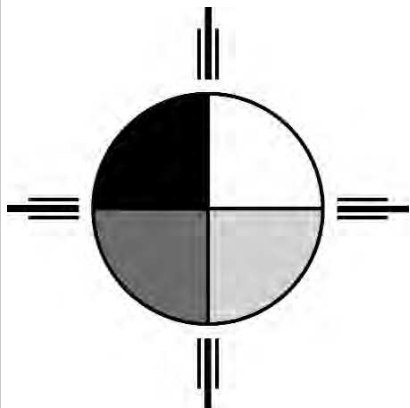
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Last Hurrah

Camellias and other winter plants

Get a few questions every fall when camellias produce their improbably showy flowers. Aren't they a bit early, people ask? Well, no. Fall-blooming camellias (*Camellia sasanqua*) come out in October every year. Sometimes the show is cut short by an early freeze. This year, at least right here in town, the weather remained frost-free until mid-November, allowing us to get full value from the camellias and a couple of other broad-leaved evergreens — all of them excellent garden shrubs that just happen to bloom in autumn.

Camellias are certainly the grandest of these, with flowers in a variety of colors. White, apple-blossom pink-and-white, light pink and deep pink is the basic range. Some have double flowers a good two inches wide. Others are single, the flowers up to three inches across with a conspicuous cluster of yellow stamens. Late-blooming 'Yuletide' has deep red single flowers that are smaller than average but very abundant. A few varieties of *C. sasanqua* are lightly fragrant.

The plants vary in growth habit, too. Some are a little lax and mounding, while others (especially 'Yuletide') are boldly upright. None is quite as stiff and formal-looking, though, as spring-blooming *Camellia japonica*. Flowers on *C. sasanqua* are most prolific with at least half a day of sun, but the plants grow and bloom quite satisfactorily on a shady wall where most other plants would sulk. Some varieties are really easy to train on a wall or a trellis, and their moderate growth rate makes camellias a good choice for containers.

For serious October fragrance, nothing beats *Osmanthus heterophyllus* (holly osmanthus). The pure white flowers are tiny but numerous, and the scent will carry a long way on a warm fall afternoon. If you can, plant it somewhere sunny, where it will bloom abundantly and adopt a better form. Don't worry if a new plant fails to bloom: Flower production will increase as the plant matures.

There is nothing wrong with plain green holly osmanthus, but there are several varieties with distinctive foliage. The leaves of 'Purpureus' (which is said to be the hardiest cultivar) are maroon purple as they emerge, becoming dark green and lustrous. They show off the flowers nicely. 'Variegates' has leaves heavily marked with cream and is one of the best variegated evergreens for our area.

'Goshiki' has yellow-speckled leaves. All are relatively slow growers that can be controlled easily by pruning.

Strawberry tree (*Arbutus unedo*) is a close relative of madrone, but this popular compact form is much smaller. It is not as small as books and labels say, however, so don't expect it to stay below six feet forever! Strawberry tree will adapt to sun or shade and becomes quite picturesque in old age if left unpruned when the shreddy, red-brown bark becomes more visible. This is a workhorse of a plant that may go un-noticed until October, when the bell-shaped, ivory flowers appear in clusters similar to those of madrone. It often sports, at the same time, spherical scarlet fruits that spent a whole year ripening.

Camellia and osmanthus are excellent as hedging plants, and unlike the popular cherry laurel and Portugal laurel, they are not (as far as I know) invasive. Strawberry tree looks best as a single specimen or planted in small groups, and old ones look marvelous underplanted with hardy cyclamen and perhaps the beautiful variegated form of evergreen *Iris fetidissima* — both of which are, like strawberry tree, drought tolerant.

Winter jasmine (*Jasminum nudiflorum*) is an honorary evergreen. When the tiny leaves drop off in autumn the stems remain bright green. Thus it looks very much alive even before the bright yellow flowers appear. A hard frost can kill unopened buds, but the light freezes that are far more common in fall will damage only open flowers, leaving some buds to open over a period of many weeks. (My plants, like many others I know, bloom in November and December, but I'm told that some specimens don't bloom until after the new year.)

Most jasmines twine, but winter jasmine is a floppy shrub. It tolerates drought, neglect and a fair amount of shade. It is happy — and spectacular — sprawling over a bank or a retaining wall, but it is easy to train on a post, wall or trellis, where it takes up much less space. The flowers are scentless. You can't have everything. When you get back in the garden in early spring, cut off or shorten the stems that carried flowers. Prune as hard as you like: The long green shoots that grow during spring and summer will carry next winter's flowers.

EW

Rachel Foster of Eugene is a garden consultant and author of *All About Gardens*, a selection of past EW columns. She can be reached at rfoster@efn.org

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