

# The Augusta Chronicle

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## COLUMNS

# Campbell Vaughn: Blooming Yuletide camellias are turning a frown upside down

**Campbell Vaughn** Columnist

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I am getting to the point where I am trying to be optimistic after the storm. There are some reasons to see some light at the end of this long dark tunnel.

One of the things that has me turning my frown upside down is getting to see the blooms of the underappreciated shrub that needs better recognition. The plant that is showing some love is the Sasanqua camellia (*Camellia sasanqua*). Some varieties are starting to bloom and it couldn't come at a better time.

Sansanqua camellia or Yuletide camellia is a fantastic addition to the landscape. Cousin to the traditional garden camellia (*Camellia japonica*), the "Japonicas" are very popular in the South with the large blooms from winter and into early spring and are ubiquitous in any true southern garden.

I do love the traditional camellias, but they are slow to grow and really require some shade so as not to have them bleach out or even suffer into decline.

I have learned that sasanquas can handle full sun most of the time and grow a good deal faster than their bigger leafed cousin. This is going to be a big selling point for the sasanquas since a lot of shade yards are now full sun.

Sasanquas are fantastic bloomers but have smaller flowers. The blooms start in early fall and last until the middle part of winter. They are very showy and when the shrub is loaded with flowers, they can be a showstopper.

Flower colors can range from deep red to pink to pure white and often have a burst of yellow in the center with different sized stamens.

Standard size would be 10- to 12-feet high as well as wide. As an evergreen, it is a great screening plant when planted in a row but can take a little more time to get up to desired privacy height compared to something like Osmanthus, Holly or Ligustrum. But patience will pay off.

All camellias are very drought tolerant when well established. I would even say it is a lot easier to kill them with too much water than not enough. Good from hardiness zone 7-9, they can handle just about what our weather can give them.

Best grown in moist, well-drained soils with plenty of organic matter, camellias can handle a little more acidic soils than most plants. Just because they handle the acidic soils more than other plants, there is no real reason to try and lower the pH to help them unless you have done a soil sample, and it is out of range.

**Campbell Vaughn:** Those looking to replace trees lost in hurricane, here are some to consider

Maintenance is easy on Sasanquas. In the summer, add a slow-release nitrogen fertilizer for deeper green leaves and a phosphate-potassium fertilizer near bud appearance. Pinching spent flowers promptly helps with nutrient depletion. Remove weak, downward lean and diseased branches pretty much whenever you see one. Make sure to make a nice clean cut one-quarter inch off the node.

Occasionally check for scale insects which will be a white fuzzy substance on the underside of the leaf. Scale is a sucking insect that can infest in large quantities and ruin your shiny evergreen leaves. Horticulture oils work well on scale insects, but major infestations may require timely applications of a systemic insecticide.

Camellias are best planted in the fall and can, if put in the ground correctly and in the right place, last in the landscape for many years.

We are bone dry now, so make sure to water any plants that are newly planted or looking stressed.

