

# Companions to the Order of Camellias

By Barry Johnson ©

Walking around our gardens in winter and for many of us that exhibit camellias in shows, it's easy to look at our camellias in isolation. Fair enough for them to be the standout beacons of the winter garden but, there are many other plants we could combine with and compliment them. Although many people are of the general understanding and misconception that camellias only grow in the shade, they tend to often use camellias as fillers, albeit beautiful ones, for these garden aspects. There are many plants that can compliment camellias by flower or foliage contrasts if they are part of your shady, or sunnier gardenscape.



*Not quite what I had in mind*

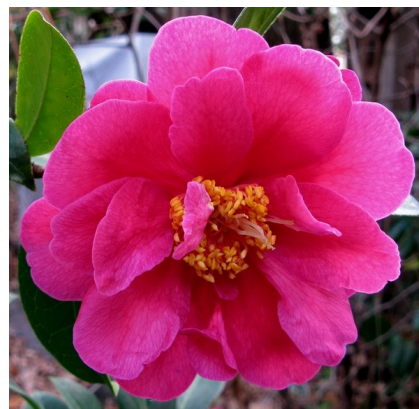
## Camellias Versus Sun.



I will deal with camellias grown in the shade later but, first let's partially explode the myth that you can only grow camellias successfully in the shade. As I travel around I often see many camellia hedges and stand alone specimens growing out in the full sun. Obviously, these gardeners have either been well informed or just got lucky. In that, I mean they have not only chosen suitable cultivars but are adopting good growing cultural practices. As a general rule cultivars such as sasanquas, many hybrids, reticulatas, will do well in considerably sunny sites. Similarly, a good number of the stronger coloured Japonicas can be quite sun hardy. The lighter coloured flower forms do not like too much exposure to excessive sun or, inclement weather (browning of flowers). I will further qualify all this by emphasizing that adequate summer watering (think drip system), mulching and feeding will be employed. If you would rather err on the side of caution, I would suggest that you grow most of your camellias out of the ravages of extreme afternoon and hot north wind aspects. Further investigation of sun hardy cultivars can be made through Camellia Societies or try Googling.

## Camellias & Deep Shade

Ideally, many camellias thrive in that good morning sun or, light dappled shade garden environment. However, there can be parts of our gardens that are enveloped by deep shade. whereby, many cultivars can struggle to perform to their optimum. Some cultivars can cope quite well and these would include the 'Elegans' family, eg. 'Elegans Champagne'; 'Elegans Splendor'; 'Elegans Supreme'; The 'Jury' family eg. 'Elsie Jury'; 'Mona Jury'; 'Pale Jury' and the Higos, eg. 'Happy Higo'; 'Kugami Nagoya' and the neon pink hybrid 'Illumination' is a shade stunner.



*H. Illumination*



*J. Happy Higo*



*Bowl of J. Elegans Splendor*



*H. Pale Jury*

## To Be Or Not To Be

Obviously, the preceding differentiations between growing extremes will be important when considering what companion plants can be employed. Camellias grown in sunny environs will give you a greater range of options than those grown in heavy shade. The dappled shade grown cultivars can allow you to use the bob each way companions. I've often heard it said that you cannot grow plants like roses or natives with camellias as they require totally different growing cultures. Bah humbug! I'm yet to see many plants that can't adapt to growing in pH neutral conditions eg. pH 6.5.

I presume you're not living in a chalk mine or an acid pit and have a naturally average pH rated garden, you can maintain the status quo by shying away from using things like chicken manure, lime, mushroom compost, acidic fertilisers etc. The 'softer' manures like cow and sheep and good general purpose organically-based fertilisers should do the trick. Make sure the fertiliser is suitable for natives before application. I have 'alkaline-loving' plants and natives growing quite happily as camellia companion plants. If you're not sure of the pH of your garden soil take some bagged up and marked samples from about a spades depth down to your local nursery and they can do a pH test and advise you about any remedial action if required. Like camellias, the main thing you need to know about companions is whether the latter are suited to intended growing aspect.



## Companion Trees



*Cherries & Crab apples*

Camellias do far better under deciduous trees than evergreen ones and this is usually for two main reasons. Firstly, the shedding of leaves allows winter sun exposure to our camellias and companion plants. Secondly, many small to medium deciduous trees have a kinder, less invasive root system which facilitates a more harmonious under planting environment. Trees like Elms, Oaks, Maples, Crab apples, Cherries, etc. provide great flower and foliage contrasts and continuity. Did I mention a third reason? Free leaf mulch. Large (hungry) native trees and ones with dense fibrous root systems can also be a problem.



## Peas in a Pod Plants

The obvious choices as companion plants for camellias are those of the same cultural requirements class eg. Rhododendrons, Azaleas, Deutzias, Gardenias, Daphne, Philadelphus, Pieris, Erica and Gordonia etc. These all fit into the acid-loving class.



*Tangerine Mollis Azalea*



*Pieris 'Mountain Fire'*



*Deutzia Gracilis*



*Philadelphus Coronarias Aureum*

## Shady Shrubbery

When deciding on companion shrubbery, obviously sizing and placement is very important. You do not want your companion shrubs to swamp your camellias hence, diminishing their command performance in winter. Deciduous shrubbery can minimise this problem occurring, such as Hydrangeas (cut down in winter), Fothergillas. Fuchsias, Euphorbias. Plectranthus 'Mona Lavender', Berberis Thunbergii, dwarf Mahonia (Wagneri x Moseri) and Kerrias would also work well.



*Fothergilla Major*



*Mauve Hydrangea Macrophylla*



*Fuschias*



## Nudging The Natives

Yes camellias can get up close and personal with many native plants, whether they are in sun or shade. Many native plants can cope well with soils with a pH around neutrality. There is a myriad of dwarf hybrid forms that will combine beautifully without over-competing or, over-awing our camellias.

Try the new dwarf wattles like Acacia 'Limelight'; 'Green Mist'; 'Mini Gog' and 'River Cascade'. Many Correas, Boronias and Croweas will also work quite well in the shade. As previously stated, care would have to be taken when feeding the camellias so that very little potash is applied to the natives. In the case of Grow Better Organic 'All purpose' fertilizer, use only half the usual application rate on the natives.



*Crowea Exalta 'Rhapsody'*



*Acacia Cognata 'Limelight'*



*Boronia Microphylla*

## Perennial Choices

In my garden, certain classes of perennials provide me with the opportunity to obtain and mass plant collections. I will concentrate on the shadier spots as these can be the trickiest. I have for some time been collecting hellebores and hostas which provide contrasting and interesting flower and foliage forms and colours. Hellebores in winter and hostas during the warmer months. The dark green foliage of camellias acts as a perfect, contrasting back drop for these cultivars. Other perennials I like to mass are Cyclamens, Cliveas and Athropodiums. Other perennials for shade worth trying are – Scadoxus Multiflorus, Tiarellas, Heucheras, Japanese & Wood Anemones, Rex Begonias and Temple grass . anemone.



*Hellebores Foetidus 'Wester Filsk'*

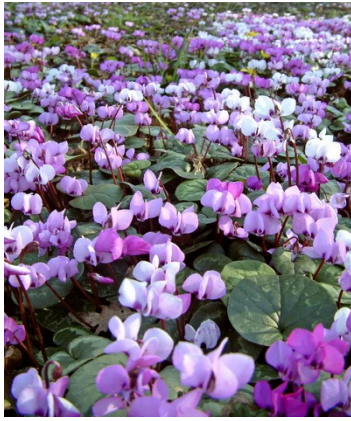


*Scadoxus Multiflorus*



*Temple grass & Hostas*

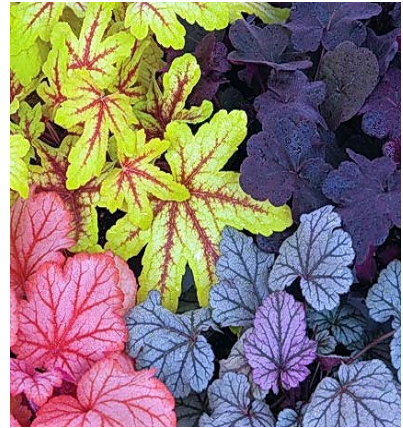




*Massed cyclamens*



*Japanese Anemone*



*Assorted Heuchera leaves*

## Shady Underbelly

Other than the criminal underworld, there is also a shady underbelly in our gardens. These are the plants that provide the living, ground-hugging under story. The general rule with groundcovers is similar to any other companions – not too aggressive or, they will take a lot of water before it even gets to your camellias. Laying a properly gridded out drip watering system prior to planting the ground covers is a good idea and then your choices can adapt for themselves. Try variegated *Plectranthus*, *Ajuga*, *Bergenia* and ground cover ferns. Native violets and Woodland Violets can be good with the later being a little invasive. However, you can now get hybrid clumping varieties like 'The Czar' and 'Czarina', if you prefer. Many bulbs could also be considered for under planting.



*Plectranthus 'Mona Lavender'*



*Aucuba Japonica*



*Bergenia*

There you have it. Our camellias don't have to be isolated and can live very happily with many neighbouring plants. Like growing any plants, there can be an element of trial and error but, I hope that this article will give you some assistance in complimenting your camellias and further enhancing your garden.