

PLANT OF THE WEEK

December 11, 2009

Camellia Camellia sasanqua And leaves

Raking up the last of the leaves before the high winds hit later in the evening, I stopped for a moment to take in the lovely Camellia that I had planted in the nook bounded by three walls of the Colonel's house, facing south toward the Sound. Despite the freezing temperatures, this lovely little plant was doing its best to provide something for the lost gardener or confused pollinator. Although not fragrant, the white double blooms of 'Winter Snowman' show up well with the dark green foliage.

"Well, my dilatory dasypygal deadhead, have you given up on the leaves, or waiting for inspiration?" The Colonel was in his holiday mood. With tweed jacket buttoned to his well-shaved chin, a green hunting hat (a la Sherlock Holmes) and a walking stick to fight off the stray dried weedhead blowing in the wind, the man of the house was just coming back from his afternoon excursion.

"Just about done, but I noticed the Camellia blooming and had to stop to take it in."

"Horace said, 'Life grants nothing to us mortals without hard work.' Didn't you bother to read the classics?"

"Mark Twain defined 'classic' as 'a book which people praise and don't read.' I have all the leaves piled, I just have to put them through the shredder."

"Don't fall in, my gambrinous geromorph!" That Colonel knows how to imbue his friends with the Christmas spirit.

I write 'Christmas spirit,' because that was my tradition growing up, not because I think it's the best or because I assume that the majority of my readers celebrate the season thus. Actually like many Christian holidays, Christmas traditions are steeped in pagan ritual. As the religion founded by Jesus spread through the world, the pragmatic wing of the church found it easier to fold the timing and many of the rituals of the older sects into the bosom of the New Order. For instance, the Christmas tree is a direct descendant of the Celtic and Northern European tradition of bringing evergreen boughs into the dwelling place to mark the shortest day of the year, the connection being that this represents 'life renewed.' Using Holly boughs or anything with berries also represented renewed fertility. Of course, the dark red berries came to represent the blood of Christ, and we celebrate His birth soon after the days begin to lengthen.

So I had been raking for several hours, and I gathered the leaves into large piles. I pulled the electric shredder near each pile, and with some degree of difficulty loaded the leaves into the hopper on the top. A large pile of leaves, that one could hide a Volkswagen Beetle beneath shredded into a pile that would fit in a small trashcan. These I transported to the perennial beds, adding them right to the top of the sleeping beauties.

This operation gets rid of the piles of leaves, but also adds carbon to the soil, where soil microorganisms churn it and the other constituents of the leaves into humus. The shredded leaves tend to stay where you put them, and as soon as they are wetted, they begin to melt into the soil. Adding leaves to the soil is an important

soil-building mechanism, but shredding them first makes them easier for the microbes and invertebrates to get to and start to break down.

Chopping or shredding leaves bound for your compost will also help the digestion process. In fact, if you can manage to chop all of your contributions to the compost pile, you will find that it will tend to be less olfactorily offensive during the summer months, when the buildup of green matter overtakes the ability of the microorganisms to digest it.

Camellias *sasanqua* is the less-hardy of the choices that have been available to gardeners, as far as cold goes. *C. sasanqua* is rated for Zone 7-9, and *C. japonica* is USDA Zone 6-9. In Connecticut this can be the slight difference between success and failure. I planted *C. sasanqua*, or a hybrid thereof, for the Colonel and his wife because it provided bloom in December, when so little else is blooming, and I knew that right at the shore, and with a south facing exposure, I could get it to live. Further inland, I would go with *C. japonica*, which blooms in late winter or very early spring.

Both of these species and all of their crosses prefer the following: acid but rich well-drained soil, some shade in the summer, especially in more southern climates, and a good loose mulch to protect the roots. They are broad-leaved evergreens, which means that they continue to photosynthesize during winter months, albeit at a much slower rate. Because they are trying to utilize water for that necessary process, one needs to ensure that the water in the soil is available in un-frozen form. I suspect that one could grow Camellias in even colder zones, if you made sure that the root zone never froze. To help ensure that water is available, planting in a southern exposure and mulching to protect that root zone are two very important keys to success.

The flowers of Camellias are in the white, pink, red and rose color coordinates with blushes of yellow and orange. Some varieties are known for a light fragrance. There are single, semi-double and double flowered types, and I have not seen a well-grown Camellia that disappointed with the profusion of flowers. Often covering the whole plant, the flower petals drop to form a thick mulch of their own on the ground. They also make a decent cut flower, considering your other choices for the cutting garden in December.

The plant doesn't need to be in bloom to be pulchritudinous, as the shiny evergreen foliage is notable in itself. The plants grow from 4 to 15 feet high, with a similar or even greater spread, especially when grown in light shade. The deeper the shade, the more the plant will tend to stretch upward toward sunlight. The genus *Camellia* has several hundred species and belongs to the Theaceae or Tea family. In fact, tea leaves are the product of the *Camellia sinensis*. The genus was named by Carolus Linnaeus after Georg Camel, a Jesuit botanist who lived and worked in the Philippines.

I finished the grinding of the leaves just as the sun was setting behind me. I put the rake in the shed, and found my way to the door where I knocked.

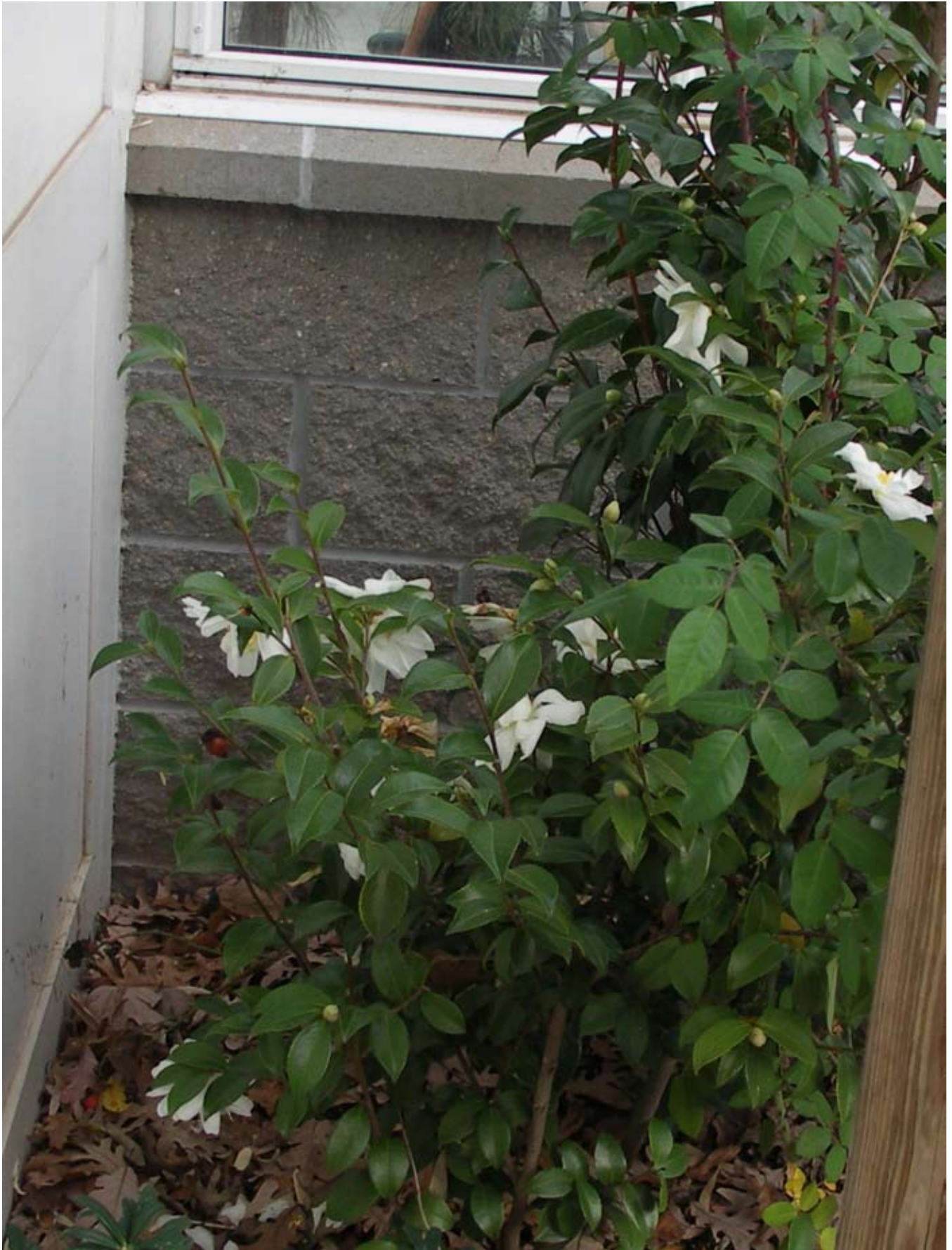
“So you come for a check, my coddled cumberwold!”

“Oh dear, would you invite him in!” The Colonel's wife Millicent was the best antidote for the Colonel's seasonal dysfunction. “And, as Mark Twain said, ‘Good breeding consists in concealing how much we think of ourselves and how little we think of the other person.’”

“He also said, ‘Honesty is the best policy...when there is money in it.’ But here, my lad,” spake the Colonel as he handed me an eggnog corretto. “Cheers and a Merry Christmas to you and your lovely wife!”



This specimen of Camellia 'Winter Snowman' is still in bloom on this cold blustery day in December. The leaves of the climbing rose planted next to our plant are turning yellow and about to fall. The glossy leaves to the right belong to the Camellia



Another view of the same plant, with the white nodding blooms showing well with the dark green foliage. My favorite December shrub.

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