

Camellia problems

GWF289

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Lack of flowers and yellowing leaves are two familiar camellia complaints. These plants are also susceptible to a number of damaging pests and diseases.

Q What causes a lack of flowers on camellias?

A Most camellias flower at an early age, but some will not flower until they are five years old or more. To make sure you have one that's of flowering age, buy it in flower. Other factors can affect camellia flowers:

Lack of water If the plant dries out when flower buds are being formed in late summer, growth will be interrupted. This results in no flowers being formed or buds dropping off just before they are due to open.

Frost After buds have formed, frost can cause them to shrivel up and turn brown. Sunlight should not be allowed to fall on frosted buds before the ice has melted, so avoid east-facing sites.

Excessive feeding This can encourage soft, lush growth that doesn't ripen enough to form flowers, particularly if nitrogen fertilisers are used.

Poor planting Badly planted specimens or those growing in poor conditions are less likely to flower.

Q What are ideal growing conditions for camellias?

A In their native habitat of eastern Asia, camellias grow in dappled shade on humus-rich, well-drained, acid soils. Rainfall and humidity are high in these

regions. In the UK, deep, acid soils with a pH of 5.5-6.5 in areas with high rainfall are likely to be the most successful spots. Use a cheap chemical pH kit to test the acidity of your soil. Only *Camellia* x *williamsii* varieties are likely to flower well outdoors in the north. Others such as *C. japonica* and *C. sasanqua* need warmer weather to produce a good display. *C. japonica* varieties prefer more sun than other kinds.

Q Do I need to water camellias?

A Camellias form flower buds the previous summer. So if they run short of water from July onwards, there is a risk of them aborting next year's flowers.

Camellias growing in semi-shade on deep, humus-rich soil which is regularly mulched in spring and autumn are unlikely to need watering, except in an unusually long, hot summer. However, camellias growing in less than ideal conditions and those in raised beds or pots may need watering up to twice a day in hot, dry spells. Mulch with a 5cm layer of bark, coir or leaf mould to reduce evaporation.

Q What should I use to water my camellias?

A Rainwater is the best. When this is exhausted, use tap water. In hard water areas do not use 'softened' water as this contains

sodium which may build up to harmful levels in the soil.

Q Do I need to feed camellias?

A Camellias growing on deep, humus-rich soils are unlikely to need regular feeding. However, camellias growing in sandy soils low in organic matter or in pots will almost certainly need to be fed. Use a granular slow-release fertiliser in April. Alternatively, use general-purpose liquid feed from March to June, swapping to a high-potash feed in July and August. Plants that don't flower well can be dressed in April with sulphate of potash at 70g a sq m.

Q Why are my camellia leaves going yellow?

A There are a number of reasons for this. Below are a few of the more common ones:

Lime-induced chlorosis A common cause of yellowing is lack of iron or manganese. This is normally worse on alkaline soils.

A feed that contains chelated iron or manganese may help to ease the problem. But, long term, moving the plant into a container may be more realistic. Don't bother with ericaceous compost - a multipurpose is fine.

Virus Leaves and branches become mottled with yellow or white markings, and flowers exhibit 'broken' or mottled colouring. There is no chemical

treatment for this disease: just prune out the affected parts.

Overwatering Root death leads to reduced uptake of nutrients. Cutting down on watering and applying a foliar feed may save the plant.

Phytophthora root rot Sadly, this fungus cannot be treated and can kill camellias. Reduce the risk by providing a well-drained soil. Look out for dead patches of bark near soil level. If you have to get rid of an affected shrub, don't replant in the same spot.

Q What causes the leaves to turn brown and fall off?

A Camellias show stress in various ways including shedding leaves. This can be caused by lack of water and, in hot conditions, camellias appreciate shade as well as water. In winter, leaf loss can be caused by frozen compost or soil. If frozen, the soil cannot supply the leaves with water, so they turn brown and leaf loss is likely. To avoid this, mulch plants growing in the ground, and move pots to sheltered spots, and insulate them with bubble-wrap.

Frosting of leaves, flowers and shoots also causes them to turn brown. This is especially likely if early-morning sunlight falls on frozen foliage. Provide early-morning shade, or move containers to shady spots.

Overfeeding can also lead to leaf loss; don't add more than the recommended levels of feed. Container-grown plants are especially vulnerable. It is best to feed camellias little and often during the growing season.

Q What is the cause of growths on the leaves?

A These are likely to have been caused by camellia leaf gall

fungus (*Exobasidium camelliae*). It appears to affect mainly *C. sasanqua*, some varieties are more prone than others. Wet weather seems to encourage attacks.

Once infected, the leaves produce conspicuous, irregular, pale-green swellings that may engulf virtually the whole leaf. Eventually, the outer coating of the gall turns off-white and infectious spores are released. Pick the galls off before this stage and bin them to limit infection.

Q Why are my camellia leaves covered with black marks?

A The most common cause is sooty mould, a fungus with dark spores which lives on the sugary substance excreted by sap-sucking insects, usually on the leaf undersides. Control the insects and wash affected leaves.

Look out for colonies of aphids and scale insects on shoots and beneath leaves. Mealy bugs can also be a problem on plants grown indoors. Pick off the worst leaves, and remove insects from the rest by squashing them, or dislodging them with a jet of water.

Leaf-spot diseases are another cause of black marks on camellia leaves. These are far more common under glass, but are unlikely to be serious. Unlike sooty moulds, these marks won't rub or wash off. Prune out the worst affected parts.

Q Why are my camellia leaves full of holes?

A Notches on the leaf edge are usually a sign of vine weevils. If you suspect this pest see factsheet GWF272 for more information.

Holes are usually caused by caterpillars, though you may not see them as they often hide by

day. Vine-weevil mouthparts are only able to attack the leaf edge, so holes within the leaves are not caused by them. Caterpillar damage tends to be worse on younger leaves and in the upper part of the shrub. Pick off and destroy any caterpillars you see. Unless you think the damage is very serious, it's not worth doing anything else.

Q What are the lumps on the underside of the leaves?

A Pale pimples on the leaves which later become corky are a sign of oedema. This damage to the cells is caused by too much water. It happens when the plant absorbs more water through its roots than the leaves can either use or get rid of. Oedema tends to occur if plants are overwatered or the air is very humid. Damage is irreversible, but won't harm the plant in the long run. Don't remove damaged leaves, as this will reduce the leaf surface area from which water can evaporate, making the problem worse.

When the lumps are pale and can be squashed, suspect scale insects. Soft scale is especially partial to camellias. Look out for them in clusters along the veins and simply scrape them off.

Q Why are the leaves curly?

A Leaves that are curled over or damaged along the edges point to frost damage. Not all camellias are fully frost-hardy, and even those that are, can be damaged when leaves are very young. Although you cannot correct the damage, you could move the plant somewhere more sheltered, or provide it with a windbreak or a temporary fleece covering in bad weather.