

In the Garden with Shobha Vanchiswar



February 1, 2008

Blooming camellias brighten the dark, cold days of winter

My camellias are in bloom and I'm in heaven. Two years ago, I came back from a trip to Charleston, S.C. with a couple of camellia plants. (My travels invariably end with me lugging home plants, pots or both.)



I keep the camellias outside in pots in a semi-shady area in the lower garden. They line a short path leading to the woods beyond. All spring and summer, they stand like sentinels with their shiny, leathery leaves and need nothing

more than water and the occasional dose of food. And, they grow.

In autumn, I give them a thorough wash with water and move the plants into the greenhouse, though a well-lit room will do. I check them periodically for early signs of flower buds, as one might search for signs of brilliance in one's child—always hopeful but prepared to settle for average.

In late December, the buds, now big and fat, start opening in slow motion. At this time, the plants are brought into the house and set near a bright window in the kitchen, where we enjoy their show. The almost saucer-sized, frilly flowers are spectacular. These are a rich, deep red in color. They look like they should have a fragrance but do not. Oh well, can't have everything. I am so grateful to the camellias for obligingly blooming in time to brighten up the dark, cold days of winter.

Dare to dream about the coming gardening season

Now, time to do some thinking in preparation for the coming gardening season. Take notebook in hand and get comfortable. Keep phone, cup of tea and any reference material by your side to make sure you will not have to disturb yourself from that cozy spot. Start pondering.

Make a wish list of what you'd like in your garden and from your garden. What needs changing or improving? Dream big. Consider what you would like to learn and do more of in the garden. Gardening is not a two season activity. It is all-season. Think structure and texture, seed heads and skeletal forms for winter. Recall any horticultural discoveries of 2007 and see how you could bring it into your garden. Ideas can always be adapted, scaled up or down. Take your time, think and write it all down. That's your task for the day!

The next day, settle down again and go over that wish list. This time, cut out the obviously absurd or impossible. You didn't really think you could have a replica of the maze at Hampton Court did you? Now, prioritize the list. Not everything may be possible in one year but you can have a timetable of sorts. Include your vacation schedule. Don't fail to also take into account the expenses. Once you're set with a rough budget and plan of action, you will feel empowered and ready to take the next step. I shall address that soon.

Response to reader's question about failed amaryllis bulbs

"I tried to save my two beautiful amaryllis bulbs from last year. Did all the things you're supposed to do but did not get any flowers, only leaves, this year. What could cause this?"

I can think of two reasons. One, perhaps they were not given a long enough rest/dormant period. I usually give my amaryllis about two and a half to three months. Two, over-fertilizing can encourage leaf growth but not flowers. I almost never fertilize these bulbs. Instead, I repot them every year. I use the same pot but fresh soil.

That being said, I would not lose hope! The amaryllis will likely still flower. That has happened to me on more than one occasion. All leaves till April and then just when I'd stopped looking, out emerges that spear that goes on to bear glorious flowers. That is the special joy of gardening - always filled with surprise. And optimism.