



**LIVING COLOR** Camellias come in an endless variety of flower forms—like these, cut from among the 60 varieties in Margaret Moseley's garden.

# lady of the camellias

Winter blossoms liven up the landscape for a year-round gardener in Decatur.

BY HILDA J. BRUCKER

April may be the cruelest month, but winter is, without a doubt, the most maligned season. The poet Thomas Nashe included winter along with plague and pestilence as things to pray for deliverance from. Willa Cather characterized the season as “shabby, old and sullen”; Shakespeare called it “wrath-

ful” and “barren.” Yet however often slandered and vilified for their general unfriendliness, the cold months blow in to the South with just a touch of the region’s characteristic hospitality: This is the season when camellia buds, having spent the summer slowly fattening in Southern gardens, burst into

bright spots of color. In Decatur, Georgia, year-round gardener Margaret Moseley looks forward to a backyard that's filled with flowers all winter. "I've been told my garden is prettier in January than any other time," she says.

Camellias are slow growers, so mature specimens are especially valued for the sheer number of blooms a six- to ten-foot shrub can produce. Many of Moseley's camellias have been in the ground for more than three decades, spread out over her three-quarter-acre garden. "We built this house in 1965, and I started gardening right away, because I finally had enough room to do what I wanted to do," she remembers.

Moseley gained her love of flowers from her mother and grandmother, who both gardened in containers. She didn't grow up with camellias, however, but rather fell in love with them when she began creating her own garden. "I saw them in a nursery in winter when they were already in bloom," she says, "and at that time of year I wanted some color out back."

Moseley's camellias include blossoms in white, all shades of pink, rose and red, as well as bicolors with striped or mottled petals. In the fall, she plants ribbons of blue pansies throughout the garden; this companion plant complements all the camellia colors and lends a sense of continuity. Her all-time favorite camellia is the large-flowered, ruffly 'White Empress,'



**WINTER BEAUTY** In all but the coldest weather, Margaret Moseley (above) enjoys being in her garden. Something is in bloom here every day of the year. 'White by the Gate' (below) is classified as a formal double; the creamy blossoms of this type are a Southern favorite.

which she loves to use in holiday arrangements, often combining it with the deep red berries of Burford holly for a festive display. "Cutting flowers is the only way I prune," Moseley says. Once cut, camellia blossoms tend to pop off the stems and so are often arranged by floating the loose flowers in a shallow bowl of water. Moseley prefers long-stemmed arrangements, however, and has a little trick of her own. "If I'm having company and I want the bouquet to last, I pin the flower to a leaf, where it won't show,

with a regular straight pin," she explains.

Camellias are native to the Orient, where they've been known for centuries. The earliest written records involve *Camellia sinensis*, the common tea plant, and go back to 500 BC, according to the American Camellia Society. Both the plant and the beverage brewed from its leaves were held in high regard, and elaborate tea ceremonies became a celebrated part of Asian culture. Tea leaves made their way to England in the 16th or 17th centuries, carried back by mer-

“Cutting flowers is the only way I prune.”  
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chants dealing in silk cloth and spices, and tea-time remains an English tradition even today.

Ornamental species of camellias made it to Europe much later; though the exact date is not known, a written log states that two were brought to England in 1792 by a ship's captain employed by the East India Company. By the early 1800s camellias had made it to the Southeastern states, where the warm, humid summers and moderate winters proved to be favorable conditions for the evergreen shrubs. Wealthy families began great collections on their estates—Middleton Place and Magnolia Plantation, both near Charleston, were famous for their camellias before the Civil War and today are popular public

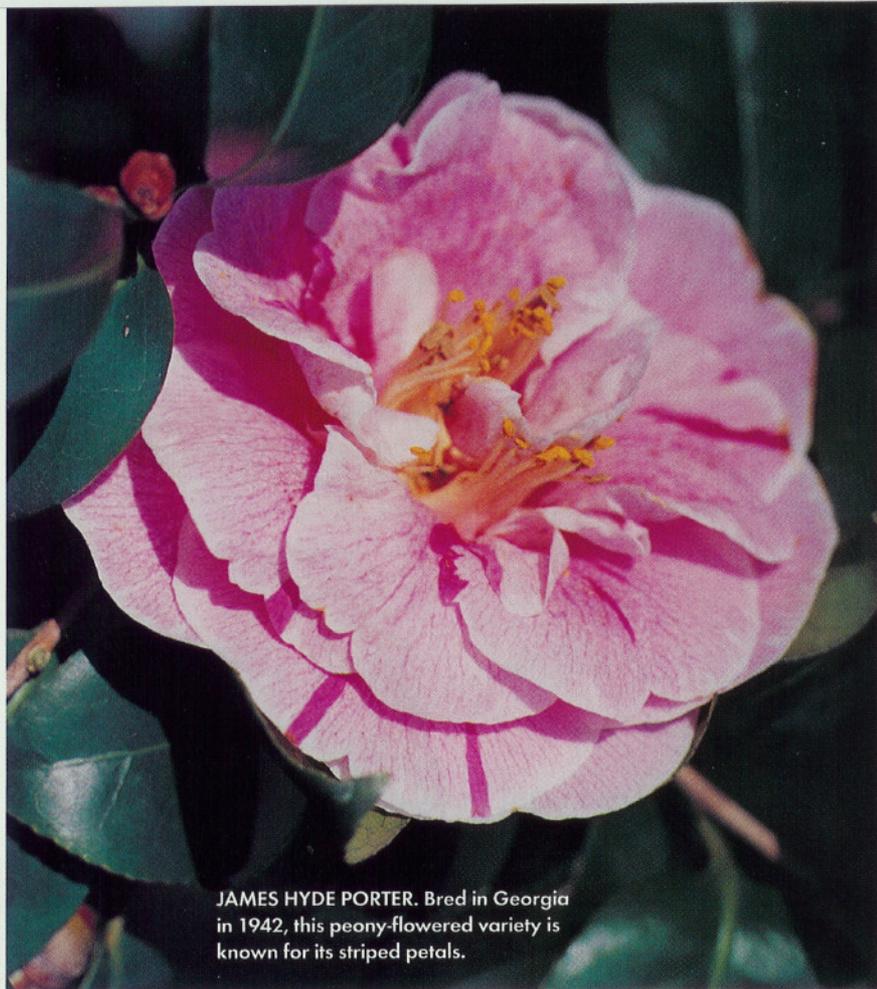
gardens. Camellias have become such an icon of Southern culture that when author Alexandra Ripley was commissioned to write a sequel to *Gone With The Wind*, she described the roguish character of Rhett Butler as a camellia aficionado.

There are over 200 species of camellias, but the only two that tend to be offered as ornamentals are *Camellia japonica* and *C. sasanqua*, which differ mainly in their bloom periods. By including both species in her collection, which numbers somewhere around 60, Moseley has a season of bloom that stretches from October to April in some



**GOVERNOR MOUTON** A popular and dependable bloomer, this variety was bred circa 1900.

years. “During cold spells, the flowers turn brown and are ruined, but the buds can weather a freeze and in two weeks the bush is in full bloom again,” she explains. Though she can enjoy views of the winter garden from a heated sunroom, she loves to stroll through it when the weather is mild. And while Moseley doesn't think of herself as a



**JAMES HYDE PORTER.** Bred in Georgia in 1942, this peony-flowered variety is known for its striped petals.

collector, she admits she can be tempted to acquire just a few more camellias. “If I see one I like, or if someone tells me about one, I add it to the garden. I probably shouldn't do it — one of these days I'll have to stop.” Is the camellia her favorite flower? “In the winter it is!” she answers with absolute conviction. ■

### Garden Club

For more information on camellias, you can contact The American Camellia Society, which was founded in 1945. It's conveniently headquartered at Masseur Lane Gardens near Fort Valley in central Georgia, and includes members with years of experience growing these flowers in our climate. Aside from educational activities and publications, the society has an extensive Web site with many helpful tidbits.

#### American Camellia Society

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