

## Winter Bloomers

Weather-wise, there's no doubt it is winter. But take a stroll in some gardens, you could be forgiven for thinking it was spring. In a garden that's planted with winter colour in mind, these cold wet months are far from dull. If your winter outlook needs brightening, then a strategically placed flowering shrub or tree can do wonders. July is a good time to plant, provided you avoid digging when the soil is very wet.

Where winter is relatively mild and frosts are rare, it's flowering time for many Australian and South African beauties, such as proteas, grevilleas and banksias. In subtropical climates vireya rhododendrons, aloes, vibrant flame vine (*Pyrostegia*), and lavish pink *Luculia* bring some of winter's warmest hues. Meanwhile, gardeners who endure our frostiest winters take heart in the very most colourful conifers and fragrant early spring shrubs, such as wintersweet (*chimonanthus*) whose flowering depends on a stiff winter chill.

Fabulous from north to south, are the classic cool season bloomers - Camellias, magnolias, azaleas, rhododendrons and daphne. These so called acid-loving plants are often grown together because they thrive in similar conditions; soil that is humus rich, cool and moist but very well drained, and lime free.

### **Camellias, Magnolias and Rhododendrons**

With exquisitely formed blooms, perfect for picking, **camellias** could be described as the roses of winter. If you have the space to plant a range of early, mid season and late flowering varieties, they'll colour the garden from autumn through spring. Flowering or not, camellias make a valuable contribution to the permanent evergreen structure of a garden, however small. Growth habits range from tightly compact to stiffly upright, low and spreading, tall, or willowy and weeping. Some make excellent hedges, some are ideal for growing flat against walls, and others are great for pots.

The larger flowered japonica and reticulata camellias are especially bold in mid to late winter. Time-honoured favourites, such as 'Guillio Nuccio', 'Elegans Champagne', 'E.G. Waterhouse', and 'Water Lily' are wonderful, both as garden display and for picking. At this time of year garden centres are well stocked with camellias in bloom, so it's a good time to make your selection.

Around Auckland the deciduous **magnolias** are already bursting their downy buds. Their majestic blooms perched on picturesque branches will brighten our horizons for many weeks to come. The pink cups and saucers of stately *Magnolia campbelli* and elegant cream tulips of *Magnolia denudata* are among the first to appear, stunning against a blue sky on their bare winter branches.

For a more confined space choose one of the smaller growing cultivars such as 'Mark Jury' (light pink), 'Apollo' (rosy red) or 'Milky Way' (white with a hint of pink). Spectacular 'Vulcan' produces huge ruby-red flowers. The many different cultivars of *Magnolia x soulangeana* are small multi-branched trees with flowers ranging from pure white through pink to rosy purple. *Magnolia stellata*, the star magnolias are the smallest, just a metre or two in height and spread. Choose later flowering magnolias if your climate is prone to frost.

Evergreen **Michelias**, close relatives of magnolias, bring the extra dimension of fragrance. In late winter or early spring the tall evergreen tree *Michelia doltsopa* 'Silver Cloud' lights up with masses of creamy white scented blooms.

In earliest spring the season kicks off for **Rhododendrons**, whose flowering peaks in October. It's no accident that rhododendrons thrive in places like Taranaki and Otago where a good rainfall combines with perfectly drained volcanic soils. They hail from misty mountain climates, where the air is cool and moist, and frequent rains filter through rich porous soils.

For warmer climates the sub-tropical vireya rhododendrons are excellent, but temperate rhododendrons will prosper wherever a suitable microclimate exists. Compact cultivars are perfect for town sized gardens.

In hot, dry or windy places, we need to pay extra attention to watering, mulching and shelter, especially when growing rhododendrons. Generally, more sun means more flowers, but in a warm climate the cool shady side of the house can be better. Preserve the beauty of white and pale camellias by planting them in shelter, away from direct sun.

Whatever your location, meticulous soil preparation is the key to getting the best from these plants. Dig in as much compost as you can. To combat imperfect soil, plant in raised beds. Mulching is highly recommended because roots grow close to the surface. Digging around such shallow roots is something to be avoided, but be sure to keep mulch well away from the trunk.

*Suggested Products – Living Earth Mulch, Living Earth Garden Mix, Living Earth Compost, Bark Mulch, Living Earth Nutrasoil, Screened Topsoil, Reharvest Coloured Mulches – available from Central Landscape Supplies in bag or bulk, pickup or delivery.*

A 5-10cm layer of organic mulch conserves moisture and suppresses weeds. The good thing about a shallow root system is that shrubs are relatively easy to shift. Ideally this is done as soon as flowering is over, preferably before the new growth commences in spring.

Yellow leaves may be a sign of poor drainage, soil compaction, too deep planting, mineral deficiency, the wrong fertiliser, or too much lime in the soil.

### **Winter flowering sub-tropicals**

Brazilian flame vine (*Pyrostegia*) puts on a spectacular mid-winter show. Equally flamboyant winter bloomers for frost free locations are *Tibouchinas*, large South American shrubs with vibrant purple flowers and velvety leaves, and *Luculia gratissima*, which graces mid winter with an extravagant feast of warm pink fragrant flower clusters.

Sculptural Aloes pack a powerful punch with their fiery orange or yellow winter flowers. Many will tolerate a few degrees frost once established, although like most succulents they won't survive long if conditions are cold and wet. Compact cousin of the New Zealand pohutukawa, *Metrosideros* 'Tahiti' produces scarlet brushes in winter and spring and works well in a large pot.

### **Coastal colour**

Australian banksias range from tall trees to fabulous low sprawling shrubs. They flower in autumn and winter. *Grevilleas*, also from Australia, provide a good source of winter flowers with varieties like, *Grevillea fasciculata*, a superb ground cover or wall spiller with orange-scarlet winter flowers.

South African *Proteas* and *Leucodendrons* are prized for their lengthy winter display of large flower heads in a range of interesting forms and many colours. They also have a liking for acidic, well-drained soil. Add plenty of compost at planting time, but no fertiliser. An open, sunny position is essential.

Among the best fillers for winter flowering in a mild climate are the African daisies, *Osteospermum*, also great for pots. Neatly compact Cape Daisies come in a wide range of attractive colours. Trim plants back in late spring to encourage compact growth and a longer life.

## **Instant winter pots**

The fastest and easiest way to brighten a winter weary patio or entrance is to fill pots with ready flowering annuals, such as pansies, primula, polyanthus, Cineraria, Cyclamen, or Iceland poppies. Look out also for colourful azaleas, compact camellias, fragrant *Boronia* and colourful foliage plants.