

Stock Management — The Camellia Way®

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INTRODUCTION

With the resurgence of the *Camellia*, it has become far more important for us as propagators to care for, and correctly maintain our mother plants, to try and maximize production. From such simple things as the soil or mix that they grow in, to the careful timing of our pruning and cuttings, as these will all leave an everlasting effect on our stock.

SOIL AND ENVIRONMENT

With the camellia family enjoying a more acidic soil, the selection of the planting site is very crucial to obtaining maximum benefit. Along with the careful site selection, it is also wise to perform regular soil checks to make sure that you are not losing any precious nutrients. Hand feeding is a proficient way of raising nutrient levels again if anything has dropped away dramatically, of course being careful not to use a fertilizer that has high lime content with the idea of keeping that pH down. In my experience, camellia plants will tell you very quickly if they are lacking in something, the yellow tinged leaves are normally a give away.

Mulching is another simple yet effective stock management tool. The mulch keeps weeds down all year round, keeping the moisture in the soil in the summer, the warmth in the soil in the winter, and all the time adding helpful organic matter into the soil. In my experience you need to re-mulch every 12 months to keep a good base.

IRRIGATION

Irrigation is another major factor in your stock's health. You have got to be able to look, and adjust your watering programme as the weather changes. I have found that a simple dripper system works really well, with an emitter at the base of every plant, with a cut-off valve at the end of each row. This allows you to have a lot more individual control over your plants. Watering can be a very fine line, but a very important one, and one we must get right. Too much water in the middle of a wet winter can lead to diseases such as *Glomarilla* and grey leaf spot (*Elsinoe tristaniae*). These fungi are fairly easy to spot with the leaves taking on blotches of a dark brown or black. These are a lot more common in a more humid area such as Auckland. Both these diseases tend to attack the older leaves, which do not get as much sunlight. As with many fungi, these can be caused by or helped to spread, if the plants have a lot of dead rotting material around, so it's imperative that you take good care and clean up after yourself. On the other extreme in the summer, if you don't water your plants enough they become stressed out and become susceptible to thrip and scale insects. These are very easy to spot with the silvery damage of the thrips showing out a lot on the older leaves, and the scale clearly visible on the plants stems. With all of the above pests and diseases immediate action must be taken. Though they do say that prevention is better than cure, which is why a carefully planned spray regime must be put in place and followed meticu-

lously. This also prevents pest and disease being past on to your production side. I have noticed over the years that some specific taxa of *Camellia* respond better to a shadier, slightly cooler climate, as some taxa suffer from such simple things as sunburn. While only being cosmetic it doesn't look terribly attractive amongst all the other stock plants.

PRUNING AND CUTTINGS

Like comedy the key to pruning is TIMING. The ability to look into the future and see when the cuttings fit into your schedule is very necessary, as if you are 1 month early or late it can throw out your whole schedule. With *C. japonica*, hybrids and more so *C. reticulata* species, where the buds are a lot further apart, hand pruning is necessary to ensure the plant doesn't suffer. It is crucial that every cut be made with a slight angle to help prevent the buds from rotting. In the ideal world you would cut to a ring of buds every time, but you can get away with an outward facing bud. Even though hand pruning is such a mundane job it is possibly one of the most important, to ensure that your plant stays healthy and fresh. Though I have found that you can successfully hedge trim the *C. sasanqua* varieties without slowing down their growth. The other important reason for trimming, though nothing to do with the plants' health, it does concern your workers' health. Pruning your stock to a height that people can work with easily and quickly. On occasions, I have found it very useful to cut off any overgrown camellias to about .75 m (approx. 2 ft) tall to try and obtain regrowth. They seem to handle and respond well to it.

The cutting stage is quite similar to the pruning but does differ. You have reached your desired goal for the year but it is still very important that you get your timing right, and that you remain neat and tidy right through so it is easier for the next year. So as I'm sure you can figure out, the keys to good camellia stock management are:

- Keeping a close eye on your plants, and listen to their needs.
- Know what your long-term goals are and stick with them.
- Be neat and tidy in everything that you do.