

Spring Colour

Let's review plants that bring colour at this time of year, so you can incorporate them for future enjoyment in your own planted areas.

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The star magnolia, *Magnolia stellata* lights up the darkest of gardens with its lightly-scented white flowers in spring. A native of Japan, this deciduous shrub is suitable for small gardens where it can be grown as a small tree. Flowers emerge in early spring before the leaves, providing a spectacular showstopper. Choose a sheltered spot in well-drained soil. *Magnolia stellata* tolerates alkaline soils but not shallow chalky soils so bear this in mind before planting.

Daphne mezereum 'Rubra'



Daphne mezereum 'Rubra' is a deciduous shrub with highly fragrant purple/pink flowers borne on bare stems in February/March. This plant is sure to add a real pop of colour to a garden. Also known as the February Daphne, it is a compact shrub that prefers a sheltered site in partial shade, but will tolerate full sun once the roots do not dry out. This plant has the added benefit of stunning scarlet – albeit poisonous – berries after flowering.

An ideal area for planting *Daphne mezereum* is close to a door, window



Star magnolia,
Magnolia stellata.

or path where you will become intoxicated by its fragrance. The flowering stems also last well as a cut flower, perfect for bringing some spring colour into your home.

Crocus tommasinianus



Crocus tommasinianus is a reliable early flowering crocus, bearing stunning deep violet flowers from early March. Planted in autumn, crocuses are perfect for adding early colour to beds, borders or pots. They can even be planted through lawns and grassed areas where they can naturalise. To date, over 120,000 crocuses have been planted on the lawns at our Teagasc Ashtown campus by the students at the college of amenity horticulture, National Botanic Gardens.

The bulbs emerge each spring, transforming a green desert to a blanket of stunning colour. Once they've flowered, as for all bulbs, allow sufficient time for the foliage to die back naturally, so energy can be stored for next season's display. This usually takes six to eight weeks, after which you can mow the grass again.

Crocuses will grow in almost all soil types, except wet soils. Ideal locations include full-sun in rich free-draining soils, however they will grow in partial shade. *Crocus tommasinianus* has nectar/pollen-rich flowers, perfect for attracting bees into the garden.

Camellia × *williamsii* 'Donation'



Camellia × *williamsii* 'Donation' is an evergreen shrub with leathery, glossy, dark green leaves. 'Donation' is a strong-growing, large shrub up to 5m in height, with semi-double, light rose-pink flowers 12cm in width in late winter and early spring. 'Donation' can flower for a long period of time, even up to May.

Camellia sp. are best positioned in shade with acidic soils with plenty of organic matter. Avoid planting in cold, dry winds and early morning sun, as buds and flowers may be damaged by cold winds and late frosts.

Mulch with good-quality garden compost or well-rotted farmyard manure and feed in spring with an ericaceous feed.

If you decide to grow Camellias in pots, don't allow them to dry out, as this can affect the flowering buds. Water using rainwater if possible, as tap water can be too hard for the plants.

A common problem associated with *Camellia* sp. is yellowing of the leaves, which often indicates they are not getting enough iron or manganese. This happens in alkaline soil where the plant is unable to absorb these essential minerals. Sequestered iron can help this process, but ensuring you plant your *Camellia* sp. in acidic soil is best. Prune immediately after flowering, only if required.