

Winter Flowers
Greg Grant, Tyler Morning Telegraph
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Gardening during a Southern summer isn't so hard. Sure it's hot, but we've got plenty of good plants that actually thrive in our unrelenting heat. These aren't the plants pictured in most books and magazines. They are uniquely Southern. As a matter of fact, you can't ever really be happy gardening in the South until you realize that we have our own plant palette. You either learn to like it, or leave it.

Most Southern gardeners know that spring and fall are the best times to enjoy a garden here. The days are pleasantly warm and the nights are tolerably cool. These are the seasons when we can grow and experience the same plants as the rest of the world.

But what about winter you ask? It's a time to rest and thumb through the endless array of plant catalogs, right? Sure we have some frosty days. But nothing like our gardening friends in the North. Our blistering summers are balanced out by relatively mild winters. We even have plants in the South that bloom during the winter. The next time you start to complain about the summer heat, why not brag about the winter temperatures instead?

The late Elizabeth Lawrence, perhaps our most famous Southern garden writer, loved winter blooming plants so much that she wrote the classic, Gardens in Winter (1961) to sing their praises. She had fellow horticultural legend, Caroline Dorman from Louisiana, provide the supporting artwork.

I love winter blooming plants just as much as these two did. They make living in the South a unique treat. Here are a few that I am especially fond of.

Blue Roman hyacinth (*Hyacinthus orientalis albulus*): This old-fashioned bulb has delicate but powerfully fragrant little flowers in late winter. Eudora Welty loved them.

Camellia (*Camellia japonica*): This Southern favorite needs no description. If you don't know it, you don't belong in the South. It's the state flower of Alabama.

Flowering quince (*Chaenomeles speciosa*): Once known as "Japonica" to country gardeners, this old-fashioned favorite is tough and makes a great winter cut flower.

Japanese plum (*Prunus mume*): This traditional Chinese flower covers its branches with fragrant pink or white flowers, which can be double or single.

Jonquil (*Narcissus jonquilla*): This native of Spain delights the senses with tiny, golden yellow flowers that spew forth a heavenly fragrance. When the jonquils bloom, I know spring will soon follow.

Narcissus (*Narcissus tazetta*): Though most people are only familiar with paperwhites, there are many types, blooming anytime from fall to early spring in tints from white to cream. Their fragrance is intoxicating.

Saucer magnolia (*Magnolia x soulangiana*): As a child growing up in Longview, I couldn't wait for the spectacular "tulip trees" to start blooming. The fragrant flowers can be white, pink, or purple.

Winter honeysuckle (*Lonicera fragrantissima*): The flowers aren't showy on this old-fashioned favorite, but the powerfully scented flowers smell like lemon cream pie and make architectural cut stems for the house.

Wintersweet (*Chimonanthus praecox*): This old-fashioned evergreen from China produces spice-scented pale yellow flowers in the middle of winter.

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Image caption: *Flowering quince is one of a number of old-fashioned Southern plants that blooms during the winter and early spring.*