

Camellia notes: Camellias were cultivated in the gardens of China and Japan centuries before they were seen in Europe. Tea made from the leaves of *Camellia sinensis* has been documented back to the 10th century BC in China. The camellia has a long history of cultivation in Japan for practical rather than decorative reasons. The leaves are used to make tea while the seeds or nuts are used to make tea seed oil which is used for lighting, lubrication, cooking and cosmetic purposes. The first Japanese record of the cultivars of this plant was in the 1700s when cultivars of *Camellia sasanqua* began appearing; (although in Japan, this plant is not considered to be a true camellia; the Japanese call it Sazanka).

The camellia was 'discovered' by Portuguese traders in China in the 16th century and brought to the West in 1692 by Engelbert Kaempfer, Chief Surgeon to the Dutch East India Company. He reported that the 'Japan Rose' grew wild in woodland and hedgerow but many superior varieties had been selected for gardens. Europeans' earliest views of camellias were in imported Chinese wallpapers where they were often represented growing in porcelain pots. The *Camellia* genus was named by Linnaeus after the Czech botanist Georg Joseph Kamel, the first person to describe the flora of the Philippines though he never described a camellia. The first camellias in England were a single red and a single white, grown in a garden at Thorndon Hall, Essex, in 1739 and later introduced to commerce. The Swedish naturalist Carl Peter Thunberg donated four specimens of *Camellia japonica* to Kew. One of these was supposedly given in 1780 to the botanical garden of Pillnitz Castle near Dresden Germany where it is still living. With the expansion of the tea trade in the later 18th century, new varieties were imported through the British East India Company. By the 1840s, the camellia was at the height of its fashion as a luxury flower. The Parisian courtesan Marie Duplessis loved the flower and inspired Dumas-fils' *La Dame aux Camellias* and Verdi's *La Traviata*. *C. sasanqua* was not known in the West until 1869 when Dutch traders imported some specimens into Europe.

The camellia was imported from England to America in 1797. In the US, camellias were first sold in 1807 as greenhouse plants but were soon grown outdoors in the south. In South Carolina, the garden of Magnolia-on-the-Ashley introduced hundreds of new *Camellia japonica* cultivars from the 19th century onwards, and its restored collection has been designated an International Camellia Garden of Excellence.

The fashionable imbricated formality of prized camellias was an element in their decline, replaced by the new hothouse orchid, and after World War I, they were seen mainly as woodland shrubs. In the 1930s, J.C. Williams, in Cornwall, created many European camellia hybrids, crossing *C. saluenensis*, recently imported from China, and a japonica cultivar; these hybrids were named 'williamsii'. One of the most famous today is 'Donation' which Great Plant Picks calls 'one of the finest camellias ever bred'.

Americans (especially Californians), Australians and New Zealanders are now the main breeders of new varieties. There are currently more than 35,000 varieties of camellias identified by the International Camellia Society.

Notes from Wed. Team Continuing education, March 2013