

# Backyard Tea

*The author shares  
her tea journeys and  
tips for growing your  
own tasty brew*

BY CHRISTINE G. PARKS

**A**s I begin writing, I am enjoying a cup of tea traditionally reserved for Chinese emperors—freshly dried tea made from the first spring buds of *Camellia sinensis*. If you've never tasted it (and chances are you haven't), let me tell you this: fresh green tea is a delicious treat. Never bitter, green tea made from whole leaves and buds is gently flavored with complex aromatics, which often remind me of a delicate perfume. Teas made from the first flush of spring growth are known for being especially flavorful! Indeed, drinking handmade tea from my own backyard has given me a completely new appreciation for why tea eventually grew from being

a medicinal herb to become a favorite of Chinese emperors and eventually the second most popular drink in the world (after water).

## DRINKING CAMELLIAS

In the United States, few people recognize they are enjoying camellias whenever they sit down with a cup of tea. Long before the uniquely American inventions of the tea bag and iced tea, ancient cultures of China and Japan were perfecting the art of making tea from *Camellia sinensis*. My tea journeys have just begun, and I am both inspired and humbled by how much I have to learn. At the same time, I can't help but share my enthusiasm for this process of discovery, which is why I was glad to have the opportunity to speak at the ACS meeting at Longwood this past winter as chairperson of our first Tea Committee.

One of my favorite venues for tea education is

an informal tea tasting. So when I was first asked to present at the ACS Annual Meeting, I imagined holding a small gathering of no more than 20 people. We ended up deciding to make the session open to the public, which was more of a logistical challenge than I'd ever imagined, with at least 1000 visitors per day at Longwood that time of year! We survived by pouring samples of a single incredible tea, Ginseng Oolong, imported by Phil Parda president of Zhong Guo Cha (China Tea). Phil also provided examples of other types of teas ranging from white to green, oolongs and smoky blacks (information at <https://secure.worldsourceintl.com/>).

Some of you may be wondering why have we decided to feature tea in the ACS? Well, simply put: in Chinese, camellias are called "*Chá hua*" (tea flower) and *Chá* is the name for tea.

*Camellia sinensis* is arguably the most popular



*Camellia sinensis* 'Rosea,'  
pink-flowered tea

and abundant camellia in the world. Our mission for Tea at the ACS is to educate gardeners and tea lovers alike about *Camellia sinensis*. Though a new focus for ACS, tea has a long and living history. Many books and organizations may offer knowledge on tea, the drink, but few resources exist from the gardeners and horticultural perspective.

We hope to educate members of ACS and the general public about all aspects of the tea plant, from cultivation to production of the tea we drink and the diversity of products and culture that have sprung from this plant. With thousands of years of written history on tea culture and cultivation, however, we will not pretend to be the ultimate experts on all things tea. Our primary focus will be on bringing to light the tea plant itself. We will explore the modern history of the cultivation and culture of tea grown in different regions throughout the world. This will include countries famous for tea, such as China, Japan, and India, as well as places less well known for tea cultivation, but where tea plays a vital cultural or economic role. We will also focus our attention on tea cultivation and culture in North America, including the potential for growing tea in our “new world” gardens. As much as we look to the past, we will be looking towards the future of tea and the evolution of modern tea culture.

#### TEA TRADITIONS

Indigenous to south China, tea was used for thousands of years as a medicinal product. Many origin stories exist, but one famous story suggests in 2737 BC tea was “discovered” by the Emperor Shen Nung. Tea became an integral part of Chinese culture over thousands of years, though maybe not always as the popular drink we know today. In 222, tea was mentioned as a substitute for wine. However, much use and cultivation of tea grew out of Buddhist traditions. In 600-800 AD traveling Buddhist monks introduced tea and Chinese tea traditions to Japan and Korea, while in 800 AD the first book on tea was written (the *Chá Ching* by Lu Yu).

Putting this in perspective, the first European writings on tea in the 1560s, when



***Camellia sinensis*,  
better known as  
the common tea  
plant.**

exports begin by both Dutch and British traders. The rest is history...more than one war was started over tea, not the least of which began with the infamous Boston Tea Party in 1773.

Although patriotic Americans were encouraged to shun tea, the British were among the European countries whose love of tea drove them to set up tea plantations in their colonies world-wide. Not that trade secrets were easy to come by: in 1848, Robert Fortune traveled undercover in China to collect tea plants, knowledge, and workers to establish British tea plantations in India. He managed to export thousands of plants and hundreds of workers (still undercover?) destined for India, though that becomes a whole other story. Suffice it to say that a native tea plant, *Camellia sinensis* var. *assamica*, was soon discovered and proved to be a more successful crop, while imported Chinese tea plants turned out to be better suited to high elevation locations such as Darjeeling.

Although grown throughout the world, tea remains an especially important economic and cultural force in China; with production of about 1 million tons

per year. Formerly exclusive Tribute Teas, enjoyed only by royalty and high officials, are now known as “famous” teas that are becoming available to the western world. These famous teas are characterized by their unique taste, appearance, and consistent quality over time. Their names often evoke the legends and geography (Dragonwell, Monkey King) or aspects of the leaf or growing conditions (Silver Needle, Sweet Dew, Cloud and Fog).

Look for future articles on Chinese tea, and what makes each tea so unique. The remainder of my time here will be spent describing, in general, how this one plant can be made into so many different kinds of teas. Knowing that thousands of years have yielded many schools of expertise on how best to process the leaf into the tea we drink, I have written the following information from the perspective of those who might want to try to grow and make their own tea at home.

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## Harvesting and Making Tea

Processed tea qualities can vary regionally and seasonally, and there are many variations of how to process the leaves into green, oolong and black teas. Most black tea consumed in the United States is harvested and processed using machines. But many of the finest teas in the world are still picked and processed by hand.

Pinching the tender stems of new growth, pick a few young leaves and leaf buds from your plant, choosing smaller leaves for green tea and larger, older leaves for oolong or black tea. White teas sometimes use just the bud. Tea can be harvested as soon as it starts to grow in the spring, (April or May in our part of North Carolina). A rule of thumb is to pluck the last two leaves and a bud of the growing stem. Leaves will grow back, and you should be able to harvest more in a week or two. Harvested tea should be processed soon after you pick it, but first leaves can be left spread out on a dish or tray to wither for several hours or overnight.

Next, the oxidation process, sometimes called the fermentation of the leaf, is what makes green, oolong and black teas different. Oxidation is what you see when a cut apple turns brown after exposed to the air. Oxidation of tea leaves produces the subtle chemical changes responsible for the distinctive taste and color characteristics of different types of tea. Green tea is not oxidized at all, and can have a grassy or earthy flavor. To prevent oxidation from oc-

curing when processing green tea, steam the leaves or stir fry them in a dry pan for one or two minutes on the stove as you would a vegetable.

Oolong tea is partially oxidized, which often adds a floral or fruity flavor to the tea. To make oolong, bruise the leaves by gently rolling them in your hands or by shaking or pressing them. Let them sit until the leaves just begin to turn brown (30 minutes to a few hours). For black tea, firmly roll and bruise the leaves so that juices are released. Let the leaves sit until they are completely brown (several hours). Oxidation takes place best in an environment that is somewhat warm and not too dry. I sometime place the leaves on a damp towel and put them in a slightly warmed oven with the heat off.

Rolling and shaping the leaves is optional but, in addition to providing the bruising necessary for oolong and black tea, it achieves a desired look and allows flavors to infuse the hot water differently than they do with unshaped leaves. Spread the leaves on a baking sheet and dry in the oven at 200-250 degrees for 20 minutes or until dry. Enjoy the aroma of the drying leaves! Dried tea can be stored in an airtight container away from the light. To get the best taste from your fresh teas, use within three to six months.

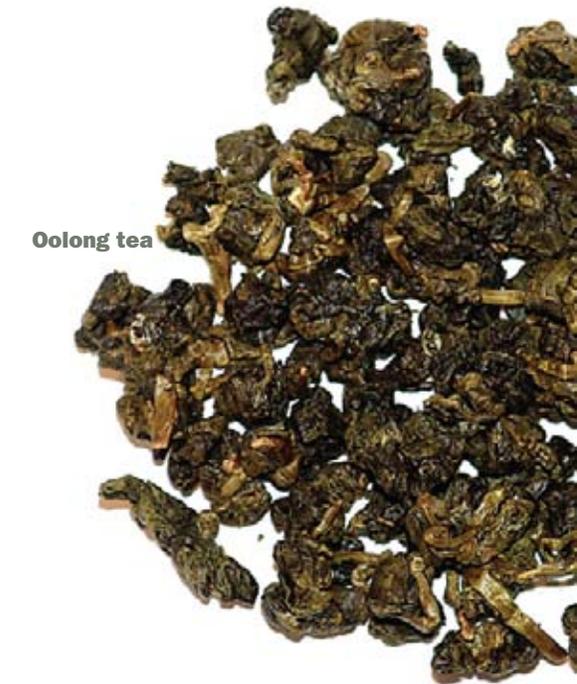
## Brewing Tea

Use about one teaspoon of leaves per cup. For green tea, add hot (less than boiling) water and let steep for two to three minutes. For oolong tea, use water that is nearly boiling and let steep for five to eight minutes. And for black tea, use nearly boiling water and steep for three to five minutes. You can infuse the leaves two or more times, but tea that sits for too long can become bitter and astringent. For less caffeine, discard the first infusion after steeping for a minute, and drink a second infusion.

**Japanese tea ceremony demonstration at the ACS Longwood convention**



**Black tea**



**Oolong tea**



**Green tea**

