

The Camellia —

A Condensed History

ELIZABETH (MRS. A. B.) COOPER

HOW PLANTS OF ANY KIND get from their native habitat around the world is quite an interesting subject and the dissemination of camellias is particularly fascinating. One of the plaques in the camellia house at the Tennessee Botanical Gardens in Nashville states that in 2737 B.C. the tea plant (*Camellia sinensis*) was cultivated in China. Thus camellias may be the oldest flower known to modern man.

Another source says that the first written mention of the genus *Camellia* (though it was not designated as such) goes back many centuries before Christ. Korean legend has it that branches of "japonica", as it was called, used at a wedding feast symbolized longevity and faithfulness. It is believed that plants were grown in that country as far back as 1200 B.C. The Koreans called the camellia "enduring winter flower" and had a proverb "A man of character abides as the japonica in the snow". Another said "If you are rich, anoint your hair with japonica oil; if poor, use the oil of the castor bean".

What is really known is that all camellia species are native of eastern Asia and it is believed that Buddhist priests carried plants and seeds with them during their travels in Japan, China and Korea. The name japonica means of or pertaining to Japan.

The plaque above mentioned also reads that around 1000 B.C. the Japanese began growing tea and that was around the time of Abraham or perhaps Moses. The plaque then skips to the 16th century A.D. and says that the Japanese made tea drinking a religious rite. There are Japanese documents of the 7th century naming camellia as a source of oil. A Chinese botanist of the 11th century (the time of the Norman conquest of England) listed 72 cultivars of *C. reticulata* which puts the beginning of Chinese

camellia culture sometime before that, possibly in the T'ang dynasty (618-906 A.D.).

Ten varieties of camellias were described by a Buddhist priest in 1630 (shortly after the Pilgrims arrived in Plymouth) but it is believed that *C. japonica* had been grown in Kyoto by the Shoguns in the 1400's. Plants believed to date back over 300 years are still growing in temple gardens there. And in Kyoto we saw bonsaied camellias that by the size of their trunks must be that old.

By the 17th century European ships were sailing Asian waters trading with China and other places. But Japan did not welcome foreigners until the mid-1800's. Members of these European trading outposts in the Orient became interested in native plants and sent many specimens home.

In 1735 Carolus Linnaeus of Sweden, then the world's most famous botanist, named the camellia after Georg Joseph Kamel, a Jesuit missionary and botanist, using the Latinized version of his name, *Camellus*. The plant was pronounced Kah-mell-yah. More than 100 years later Alexandre Dumas' novel, "La Dame aux Camelias", was presented on the English stage and the title was shortened to "Camille", pronounced Kah-meel. From the influence of this play, the plant came to be pronounced kah-meel-yah. Most dictionaries give both pronunciations as correct so you can take your choice.

Going back to the naming of the plant by Linnaeus for Kamel, we learn that the latter died in 1706 in Manila where he had been a missionary in the Philippines most of his adult life. There is no evidence that he ever returned to Europe and also no evidence that he ever saw a camellia. He was interested in plants of the Philippines and wrote a treatise on these which later came into the hands of Linnaeus.

Here another person enters the picture, one Englebert Kaempfer a German doctor of medicine. He became a ship's surgeon and as such visited both China and Japan. In 1712 he published a 900 page book on the plants he had seen in his travels giving 25 pages to the tea plant and good descriptions of two kinds of tsubaki (camellia in Japanese), those we know now as *camellia japonica* and *camellia sasanqua*.

Linnaeus like Kaempfer was a doctor of medicine and Kamel had been trained as a pharmacist. Their interest in plants stemmed from the use of plants in that day in treating human ills. However,



A colored engraving (Plate 67) from Volume II of *A Natural History of Birds* by George Edwards. The plate is titled "A Peacock Pheasant of China." This was taken from one of the rare prints in ACS Library. Dated 1745, it is earliest known colored print of a camellia. "This beautiful flowering Tree was raised by the late curious and noble Lord Petre, in his stoves at Thorndon-Hall in Essex."

Linnaeus gave most of his attention to botany and is famous for the binomial system whereby plants are named with two Latin words, one for the genus and the other for the species. This system is in worldwide use to this day.

In a monumental work "Systema Naturae" in 1735 Linnaeus gave the camellia its name for the first time when he listed "Camellia,* Tsubaki, Kp." The asterisk indicates that Linnaeus gave it that name; tsubaki is the Japanese name and the Kp. is for Kaempfer who first described the plant calling it by the Japanese name. But the name camellia was not complete according to Linnaeus' binomial system. So in 1753 he made it *camellia japonica*, the camellia of or from Japan. In this same work he gave the tea plant its Latin name, *Thea sinensis*, later changed to *Camellia sinensis*. None of the three connected with the naming of the camellia ever met; Kamel died before Linnaeus was born and Kaempfer died when Linnaeus was five years old.

By the end of the 17th century there was brisk trade between Europe and the Orient and the new drink, tea, became increasingly popular in Europe. You all know the old story of how one enterprising ship captain thought he would eliminate going half way around the world to get the makings and took with him to England what he thought were tea plants. But the Chinese, according to this unsubstantiated but charming story, were too smart to give

up this lucrative business and substituted *camellia japonica* for *Camellia sinensis*. Tea plants did reach Europe around 1740 but were not a commercial success. The same was tried in America equally unsuccessfully and tea leaves to this day are still imported from the Orient.

Many historians set the date of the introduction of camellias to England as the early 1700's as somewhere it is recorded that in 1739 they were grown there by Lord Petre. However, it is thought that the camellia may have come first to Portugal, but there is no concrete evidence that camellias were growing in Oporto, Portugal as early as the middle of the 16th century. There is some logic to this as the Portugeses were the most far-reaching of sailors of that period.

We don't know what the first *C. japonica* was (other than the single red) to reach England but we do know that in 1792 the captain of the British East Indian merchantman "Carnatic" brought home an 'Alba Plena' and a 'Variegata' and in the years following he brought others. 'Capt. Rawes', perhaps the first *C. reticulata* in Europe, arrived in 1820 and was established as a new species. In 1841 when Berlèse published Volume I of his famous three volume work on camellias he listed 282 cultivars. Later, he added 151 others. By 1859 there were 14 distinct species known.

Around 1813 a nurseryman named Seidel, who had worked in Paris, carried a few camellia cuttings home to Dresden after service in the Napoleonic Wars. Within 30 years he had 100,000 plants growing under glass which he sold as pot plants in St. Petersburg, Vienna, Budapest, Madrid and Florence.

At this time also camellias were very fashionable in France. Ladies carried camellia bouquets and no well-dressed dandy would be without a camellia in his buttonhole during the season. Dumas' novel is a picture of the times around 1848. In the *American Camellia Yearbook* for 1957 there is printed a list of 650 cultivars in Italy which a Florentine aristocrat, Cesare Franchetti, offered from his private garden in 1855.

Despite all this, European interest in camellias began to wane around 1900. Old plants were neglected or abandoned and little attention was given to camellias until after World War II, some years after the revival of interest in the U. S. and formation of the American Camellia Society in 1945.

Camellias came to the United States from both east and west and the first arrived soon after the Revolutionary War. John Stevens of Hoboken, N. J. is thought to have imported the first *C. japonica* in 1797 or 1798. In 1800 he added an 'Alba Plena' brought to him by Michael Floy, an Englishman who established nurseries in Bowery Village and Harlem. Other nurserymen began importing and raising plants from seed thus obtaining new cultivars. The first camellia list in a catalog is thought to be from William Prince's Linnaean Botanic Garden at Flushing, N. Y. in 1822 in which he listed a "sasanqua". The *C. sasanqua* did not reach any real interest in the U. S. until 1900.

Camellias also were brought into New England during this time and the Boston Conservatory boasted of having 1000 plants of *C. japonica* in bloom during the 1838 Christmas season. They also were being grown by amateurs and nurserymen in Philadelphia, Washington and Baltimore.

The first record of a camellia in a show was in Philadelphia in 1828, the year Andrew Jackson was elected president, and three blooms were shown. It is thought that the first camellias used in the White House was during Jackson's term of office.

Records of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society show that in 1829 the society offered a premium of \$3.00 for the greatest number and finest kinds of blooms of *Camellia Japonica*. From that year on, records show interest grew rapidly and camellias became an important feature of the Society's exhibitions. In 1835 and 1836 several camellia shows were staged by leading growers of the day. In more recent years camellias were shown in conjunction with other plants and flowers but with its renewed popularity, in 1939, the Society established a separate camellia show, which is now held annually. In February 1979 the Massachusetts Horticultural Society will hold its 150th camellia show.

David Landreth founded the first seed company in Philadelphia in 1784 where he also sold camellias. He opened a branch in Charleston, S. C. in 1818 to which his camellias went and were some of the first in the South. From 1830 to 1860 thousands of plants arrived for the plantation owners of the low country. It was during this same period that Magnolia and Middleton Gardens near Charleston were established and planted with camellias. Fruitland Nursery in Augusta, Ga. was established in 1858 and sold camellias until this property became the Augusta National Golf Club. In

Mobile, Langdon's was the first nursery—established in 1853. As the great Cotton Kingdom opened up, camellias traveled along the waterways of the South, up the Mississippi and its tributaries and thus inland. The first in Florida was thought to be a 'Pink Perfection' brought by the U. S. Minister to Japan in 1873.

Naturally the popularity of the camellia or of any flower died in the South with the coming of the War Between the States. It began to revive in the early 1900's when E. A. McIlhenny planted 100 cultivars in his Jungle Garden at Avery Island, La. He gathered many of his plants from the old gardens in the area and within 30 years he had thousands which we saw when we went to the Texas Camellia Society meeting at LaFayette, La. (We also saw Tabasco sauce being made). K. Sawada, a Japanese nurseryman, moved to the Mobile area in 1910 and became one of the foremost camellia growers. The enthusiasm for camellias and the disturbance about camellia nomenclature brought about the formation in February 5, 1932 of the Azalea and Camellia Society of America—which in 1939 was known as the Camellia Society of America. This forerunner of The American Camellia Society published annuals in 1933 and 1939—the first such in the United States.

The camellia pioneer in the West was James L. L. F. Warren who went from Boston to Sacramento in 1850, the year California became a state. He sent back to Boston for plants and seed which arrived in San Francisco via the S. S. *Panama* in 1852, after an overland crossing of the Isthmus of Panama. They flourished; others became interested and the addiction spread. There are some 100-year old trees in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco and the capital grounds in Sacramento are planted entirely in camellias. The Southern California Camellia Society was organized in 1940.

The first Australian record of camellias imported from Europe dates from 1831. Today Australia and New Zealand are among the most enthusiastic of camellia-growing countries. There is now an International Camellia Society to which some of us belong. It has members in 21 countries including Africa, Belgium, China, France, Germany, Greece, Holland, India, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland, Taiwan, Russia, Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the British Isles and the United States. This group will have its 1978 meeting in November at Masee Lane, headquarters of the American Camellia Society near Fort Valley, Ga.

Let's go back a few hundred years and talk about the tea plant, *C. sinensis*. Tea was introduced to Europe around 1610 when the Dutch began to import it from their tea plantation in Java. They were soon overpowered by the British East India Company who secured almost a world monopoly of the tea trade although almost every European colonial power tried without success to grow tea in all their possessions in the tropics.

The first importation, of processed tea into North America was by the Dutch into New York in 1650 which started the colonists into being tea drinkers while at the same time England was a nation of coffee drinkers. Beginning in 1660 tea began to be taxed in England and its colonies until the tea tax had risen to 119 per cent by the time of the Boston Tea Party. Did it ever occur to you that one of the preludes to the American Revolution came about through *C. sinensis*, a "first cousin" of our own *C. japonica*?

Also did you ever think there was anything to do with camellias other than wear, decorate or show them? In addition to making the beverage *C. sinensis* is used for food in Burma, Thailand and China. In Burma leaves of the tea plant are steamed, packed into the ground and the resulting pickle is considered a delicacy. In some parts of Japan, young and tender leaves of the sasanqua are steeped for tea which is said to be very fragrant and superior in taste to regular tea. Oil extracted from camellia seeds is used in cooking and for hair grooming; the seeds themselves are dried and made into necklaces, earrings and finger rings. Wild camellia trees are made into charcoal used for cooking and heating. Camellia branches are said to make excellent walking sticks because of their strength and flexibility. Leaves are used to roll cigarettes and are sometimes dried and made into sachets to be offered at shrines.

A number of years ago Ferol Zerkowsky of Slidell brought to the ACS meeting in Orlando enough camellia jelly for everyone to sample. It was made from red petals and had a magnificent color but not much taste. Art Landry of Baton Rouge has come up with a quite good tasting wine made from red camellia petals. "Vi" (Mrs. Henry) Stone of Baton Rouge brought some of the wine for Gulf Coast members to taste at a recent meeting.

Whatever you do with camellias—wear, show, decorate, drink or eat—they are one of the great gifts of nature to mankind—a double miracle since they bloom in winter when almost everything else is bare.