

Kosaku Sawada

GEORGE SAWADA
Mobile, Alabama

ACROSS THE GIANT PANORAMIC SCREEN of our times there loomed a bright star. A star that emerged from the Far East (Osaka, Japan to be exact) on October 21, 1882 and raced across the broad expanse of America for over a half century and then slowly and gently sank beyond the sunset on April 15, 1968. As this star was passing from the screen, it exploded into a myriad of other stars and formed a galaxy that will brighten the lives of others for many years to come. Each of these new stars bore a name. One was called "Mr. Camellia", another "Pioneer", and others were "Plantsman", "Plant Breeder", "Plant Scientist", "Painter", "Author and Lecturer", and finally "Phantastic Pharmer". Each of the stars in this galaxy had the common characteristics of proficiency, prolificacy, and professionalism.

Then, there was one other star and it was labeled "Papa". This last star may be the cause of an indictment that the ensuing article may be biased, but let it be restated here in the words of Confucius (or was it Noteworthy?) who said, "truth often is extracted and exacted through biased eyes."

The giant star that we are talking about is the man, K. Sawada. He needs no introduction to any Camelliaphile or to any one who is even vaguely interested in, or familiar with Camellias. To look at this man, let us examine each of the stars that were referred to above.

MR. CAMELLIA

This was title that was deservedly earned by K. Sawada for he ranks at the very top of list of those who have contributed most to the culture of Camellias in America. He was a successful nurseryman for many years, operating the Overlook Nurseries of Mobile, Alabama where he grew millions of camellias in thousands of varieties for the trade. He was one of the pioneers of growing and promoting Camellias in this century.



Kosaku Sawada

As early as 1910, he was importing *Camellia* plants and seeds from Japan. Soon thereafter he was scouting the Southern countryside looking for and obtaining many varieties of *Camellias* from the nineteenth century homes and gardens.

The early catalogues of Overlook Nurseries offered *Camellia* plants for sale. These offerings were not varieties as we know them today, but simply as doubles or singles; or pink, red, or white.

On through the roaring '20s and the dull '30s, he continued to collect *camellia* seeds and plant them. With his loving nurture and scientifically sound program these seedlings began producing and it was in the late '30s and in the '40s that he began introducing a number of them as new varieties. K. Sawada has introduced more new varieties (some thirty plus) than anyone. Such varietal names as 'K. SAWADA', 'MRS. K. SAWADA', 'IMURA', 'WHITE EMPRESS',

I.



'OMEGA'



'DIXIE KNIGHT SUPREME'



'MARGUERITE SEARS'



'LYNDA BROTHERS'



Asper Hybrid:
'CRIMSON ROBE' × 'TIFFANY'



'TOMORROW'S TROPIC DAWN'

'WHITE GIANT', 'WHITE QUEEN', 'WHITE KING', 'RED HIBISCUS', 'ROSE MALLOW', 'LURIE'S FAVORITE', 'ROBERT NORTON', 'RISING SUN', and 'QUEEN BESSIE' soon became quite common and popular.

After all this success in introducing new varieties from chance seedlings, he turned his attention to controlled plant breeding methods. He carried on extensive studies in genetic and plant breeding subjects and then he tirelessly and painstakingly embarked on a Camellia breeding program that was unparalleled in his time. He made thousands upon thousands of controlled pollinations and raised the relative number of seedlings. Out of all these crosses, he grew many excellent flowering sorts, but as he put it, they were not significantly different from existing varieties, therefore he did not introduce them as new varieties. However, there was one that was exceedingly different and which came nearer to his aims and goals than any other seedling. This one he called 'SAWADA'S DREAM' and offered it as a new variety. This flower is truly magnificent and is regarded as the hallmark of his Camellia breeding program. Other noteworthy introductions were 'TINY PRINCESS', a hybrid (*C. fraterna* × *C. japonica*), 'BIENVILLE', and 'OVERLOOK WHITE'.

PIONEER

This is an all inclusive star because K. Sawada was a pioneer in almost all of his activities. He was a pioneer nurseryman in the Gulf Coast area, he was a pioneer Camellia grower, and he was a pioneer Camellia and plant breeder. He was forever looking ahead and forging ahead in quest of something new and something better.

The truest expression of his pioneering spirit is told in the story of how he happened to leave his native Japan, migrate to America, settle in Texas, and then finally move to Alabama. Many people have wondered how it happened that K. Sawada should become a camellia grower in Alabama. The story goes thusly: A Mr. Mykawa was an official representative of the Japanese government to the 1904 World Exposition in St. Louis and during his visit to this country he became interested in promoting a rice farming venture around Houston, Texas. He returned to Japan and began recruiting some people to help him with his New World venture. He succeeded in getting four young men to come with him to America. K. Sawada was one of these young men. Misfortune befell this new farming operation in the very first year in that Mr. Mykawa was killed in a farming accident. The rice farm made gallant efforts to survive, but failure was destined. After this failure, K. Sawada along with several other of his countrymen began operation of the

Alvin-Japanese Nursery in Alvin, Texas. The main operation of this nursery was in importing citrus trees (satsuma orange) from Japan and planting these trees in vast orchards in southeast Texas. A number of other plants were imported along with the citrus. *Camellia japonica* were among these. The citrus boom lasted for a number of years, but then it became apparent that greener fields in the citrus industry existed eastward in south Alabama; so K. Sawada pulled up stakes and moved to Grand Bay, Alabama. From the Grand Bay nursery he planted thousands of acres of satsuma and pecan orchards throughout the area. Even though fruit and nut trees were his primary interest, he always was growing and promoting ornamental shrubs. Camellias continued to hold a high place in his interests. Mobile, Alabama was the "big" city near Grand Bay, so in 1914 the nursery acquired some land near the city and in 1918 he moved the operations there. The name of the nursery was changed to Overlook because the location was such that it overlooked the city. Overlook Nurseries still maintains operations at this original site.

So that is how K. Sawada happened to be growing Camellias in Mobile, Alabama.

PLANT BREEDER

This is one of his brightest stars. His work and accomplishments in producing new varieties of *Camellia japonica* has been related in the section, "Mr. Camellia". His plant breeding efforts were not confined to *japonica* because he has done extensive work with *sasanquas*. *Sasanqua* varieties such as 'PAPAVER', 'SPLENDOR', 'GULF BREEZE', 'FRANK PERSONS', 'VERSICOLOR', 'SNOWFLAKE', 'AUTUMN BEAUTY', 'GULF GLORY', 'FLORIBUNDA', 'LAVENDER QUEEN', 'ROSY MIST', and 'SLENDERLEE' along with a half dozen or more varieties are the results of his work.

The azalea was also a fertile field for his endeavors in plant breeding. His contributions were such varieties as Hino-Supreme, El Frida, Gulf Pride, and Daphne White. It is interesting to note that he made one of the few successful intergeneric crosses involving the azalea. He crossed *Lonicera sempervirens* × *Azalea indicum* and grew a number of progeny. Unfortunately, these were of little significance.

Magnolia and amaryllis breeding were included in his efforts.

He also introduced a new variety of *pyracantha*. *Pyracantha formosanum* var. Low Dense is a totally different sort resulting from a chimaera.

PLANTSMAN

K. Sawada lived plants. He was always looking for something different and something better. He was one of the few remaining old hard-core gardeners who were known as plantsmen.

He made numerous importations of many kinds of plants from Japan as well as from other parts of the world. He also availed himself, whenever possible, to acquire introductions from other sources, namely the United States Plant Introduction Bureau. His credits along this line would be *Photinia glabra*, Near East crepe myrtle, *C. vernalis* 'DAWN', sasanqua 'CLEOPATRA' and 'BRILLIANCY'.

Whenever he found a plant that he particularly liked and found that it was unadaptable to his area, he worked hard and long to devise methods to grow these plants. Whenever he found out that the Japanese flowering cherry would not grow in the South because of the unadaptability of the root stock on which it had to be grafted, he finally succeeded in propagating it from cuttings and so now the Japanese flowering cherry is a common and popular tree in the Southern garden. So likewise it was with the Japanese bloodleaf maple.

He was always collecting, propagating, and promoting some different worthwhile plant. He did so with a great number of Japanese varieties of azaleas, with Glenn Dale azaleas, with the Oriental magnolias, and also with a large number of other plants that he found interesting and fascinating.

PLANT SCIENTIST

A "one man private horticultural research station" would probably be the best way to describe K. Sawada in his efforts in this field. He carried on many experiments in many different horticultural areas. Each of his experiments were professional in its design, execution, recording of the results, and the analysis of the findings.

Among his experiments were: varietal tests involving many different plants; propagation tests involving plants, media, and environmental conditions; tests of the effect of different radiations on Camellia seeds and seedlings; tests of the effect of colchicine on Camellia seeds and seedlings; tests using hormones on fruit set on Camellia; and test on Camellia pollen storage.

PAINTER

Even though he had no formal training in any of the arts, he was a prolific and expressive artist. His most productive work, that

is so far as number is concerned, was with water colors of Camellia flowers. He had several hundred of these and they are presently being assembled and hopefully destined for public interest, possibly in the library of your American Camellia Society. These pictures are valuable in that in addition to the painting of the flower itself, he noted detailed descriptions of the flower as well as the leaves and plant. He also noted any other information that he had on the history of the variety.

In addition to water colors he dabbled in oils and charcoal.

AUTHOR AND LECTURER

His contributions to magazines, periodicals, and newspapers were many, but his most complete and prolific writings were for the American Camellia Society Yearbooks. A close reading of these yearbook articles gives a very close insight to the philosophy, aims, and character of this man. These articles are:

- 1947—My Experience With Camellia Seedlings
- 1948—Storing Camellia Pollen
- 1947 Camellia Cutting Experiments
- 1949—Further Experiments With Camellia Breeding
- My Wishes for the Camellia of the Future
- 1951—Northern Line for Camellia Growing Outdoors in Japan
- 1952—How to Make Camellia Seedlings Bloom in Two Years
- 1953—Some Facts About Camellias Described by a Grower
- 1954—Some Studies on Camellia Fruit and Seeds
- 1955—Cross Pollination of Camellia Flower
- 1960—How to Produce New Varieties of Camellia Japonica
- 1965—The Sawadas and Their Camellias

He has spoken to Camellia clubs and societies in every section of the United States. Most of his discussions were on subjects similar to those which he wrote about in the yearbooks. He was an untiring talker when the subject was Camellias, but usually he was a man of few words. Whenever he got to talking about his Camellias, he would go on for hours. He would get so involved in this, his favorite subject, that time became of no importance or consequence to him. He would often say, "I wonder why everybody invites me to talk to their Club? Maybe, they want to hear my broken English and accent." Far from it—people wanted to hear about Camellias, first hand, from a man who lived, breathed, and loved Camellias for so long.

"PHANTASTIC PHARMER"

K. Sawada was a "dirt farmer" at heart and he never strayed far from it. The only trouble was that he was a farmer far ahead of his times. He was growing kohlrabi, kale, cauliflower, and Brussels sprouts at a time when all that most people knew about and wanted were turnips, collards, and cabbages. He was growing tomatoes at a time when some people were still saying that they were poisonous. Four-pound sweet potatoes, yard long cucumbers, eighty-pound watermelons, and giant radishes did not sell well, but he grew them and was satisfied for all of these were the results of his continuous search for something different and something better.

He was a poultry farmer of great stature. He had produced a flock of chickens that were so superior in egg production, through breeding and selection, that his hatching eggs always brought a premium. He was raising and marketing capons at a time when the housewives would blush when they would ask for them at the markets.

Yes, he was a farmer, far ahead of his times. Fantastic would be the word.

PAPA

And, this last star is the brightest and the most treasured. It is a many faceted star and each facet shines clear and true. They are not the least bit shadowed by insincerity, pretense, or compromise. One facet shows dignity, another humility, and others indicate industry, truth and honor, vision, compassion, benevolence, concern, education, and just plain hard work.

These were the things that K. Sawada lived by—these were the things that he emitted—and these were the things that he sought in others.

This capsule account of the life of the man, K. Sawada, tends to lead one to think that he left us a legend, but far from it, for all that he left us was a legacy. That is the way he would have wanted it. He was that kind of a man.