

OLD CAMELLIAS OF LOUISIANA'S WEST FELICIANA PARISH

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I AM sorry that the camellias of one's great-grandparents cannot converse with us. It would make this article much easier to compile and probably more interesting and accurate. Undoubtedly, most of the old camellia trees of West Feliciana Parish are hoary with age, though exact dates of purchase and planting are a matter of conjecture at the present time as are their varietal names and origins in many instances.

Some of these first camellias were badly crowded in the old gardens, for their owners did not realize what the small greenhouse plants could do in a soil and climate that they found entirely suitable. However, those fortunate enough to escape being tucked into small garden beds grew into real trees as the years went by.

Most of the early gardens of this community were laid out in the 1840's and 1850's, and the landscaping of grounds always included groups of camellias. These plants were brought back from visits to Europe or from the eastern states. Flatboats came down the Mississippi River and stopped at the busy port of Bayou Sara below the town of St. Francisville. They carried camellias from the eastern nurseries for our southern gardens.

Rosedown Plantation was noted for its fine collection of these shrubs, having over two hundred varieties. Some of them were brought from Europe by Mr. and Mrs. Daniel Turnbull, grandparents of the present owner, Miss Sarah Bowman. They traveled widely and collected plants for their beautifully landscaped grounds. Most of the camellias at Rosedown have grown to immense size and are well over a century in age. Miss Bowman describes three in particular of those brought from France: "The Bougere, a large light red; Lamarque, a beautiful pink; and Philadelphie, a small pink."¹

¹ Of these three old plants, only the name of the last one has been located in varietal records. It is properly spelled Philadelphia; the variety is a Philadelphia seedling produced by J. B. Smith in 1832.—Eds.

Among the earliest camellias brought to West Feliciana were those of Dr. Ira Smith at Troy Plantation. Dr. Smith died in 1850. His daughter, Miss Sarah Pirrie Smith, purchased these plants in Europe for her father. Many years later, in 1930, Mrs. Edgar Stern of New Orleans bought a number of the old trees and moved them to her place in New Orleans where they bloomed well for several years until they died. At one time I saw two varieties, a double red and a pink-peony type, blooming beautifully in Mrs. Stern's garden. Though moved with every care, the great weight of the root balls of these large trees finally caused them to sink and poor drainage resulted in their loss. There are about five varieties, white, pink and variegated, left at Troy at the present time. Some of these may be seedlings.

Mrs. Harriett Flower Mathews of Greenwood Plantation was credited with bringing the first camellias to the parish (see Fig. 30). These were an *Alba Plena*, now dead, and one unknown variety which still survives. This plant produces an insignificant, small, double, variegated purplish-pink flower. These old camellias were purchased from an eastern nursery. Among the original trees still alive at Greenwood are *Landrethii*² — with its small, regular, double pink blossoms—*Alba Plena*, *Fimbriata*, *Imbricata*, *Waratah* and *Elizabeth*. Besides these there are a number of old camellias whose names are lost to us. One of these, grown long ago from a cutting of the pink-peony variety of Troy, has produced several distinctly different and handsome sports, including single and incompletely double flowers, both pure white and in two distinct shades of pink.

Catalpa Plantation had an exceptionally fine collection of camellias planted by its owner, Mr. William Fort. Included in the collection were *Alba Plena*, *Fimbriata*, *Sarah Frost* and the beautiful *Donckelarii*. Some of these trees still survive, including several lovely ones that have outlived their names. We have in the Greenwood garden a camellia of remarkable beauty which was grown from a cutting obtained from the Catalpa Plantation. It is a peony-form flower, variegated with striking dark red and purest white. I have never heard of any name for this variety.

² Many readers will recall the interesting story, featured in recent issues of *Home Gardening*, of the "rediscovery" of *Landrethii*.—Eds.

The Cottage Plantation, founded by the Butler family, had many beautiful specimens of camellias. Alba Plena, Fimbriata, Governor Mouton, Jenny Lind, Kimberley, Lady Hume's Blush and Sarah Frost were among the handsomest. The Governor Mouton was bought by Miss Anna Butler from a neighbor, Miss Judy Dawson of Clover Hill Plantation. At The Cottage, now owned by Mr. and Mrs. Jesse Brown of Chicago, nearly all of the old original camellias are still living.

When Clover Hill was sold after the Civil War, two of the camellias left of the original planting were moved to St. Francisville by Mr. Emmanuel Wolfe for his garden. They still stand in front of the Wolfe house, now owned by Dr. P. A. Neibergal and used as his office. One is a double dark red, a variety very common in old gardens; and the other is a small, double deep pink.

Just beyond the town of St. Francisville is an old place that was formerly the home of Governor Wickliffe. Two very old trees are left in the former garden, an Alba Plena which I know to be at least one hundred and twenty years old, and a red double variety whose name is unknown to me. It is probably the same rather peony-like, small red variety that crops up in so many old camellia plantings throughout the South. I have been told that this variety was named for Prof. C. S. Sargent,³ which makes me feel indeed venerable as I have had the pleasure of meeting this great man when he was a guest in my own home!

So far I have mentioned only those camellias that were planted prior to the Civil War. Then a twilight fell on the old gardens and these flowers of the gods. People could no longer buy expensive plants and those who had first loved and tended the camellias were passing from the scene. More than one handsome tree was sold for cash to swell the fund that propped a sagging roof-tree. But some did not give up even under the stress of reconstruction. Cuttings and grafts were employed and seedlings were cherished through the years until they bloomed. Mrs. J. B. McGehee of Woodlawn Plantation had a collection of camellias grown entirely by herself from cuttings gathered throughout the parish. The present owner of Woodlawn, Mrs. T. H. Martin, has rescued these trees from oblivion and given them splendid care.

³ The variety most likely in question here is one commonly found with the name *Orientalis* or *Oriental* applied to it. This variety does not agree with descriptions of the old *Orientalis*; the correct name is not known.—Eds.



Fig. 32. Two of the first camellias planted in West Feliciana Parish, Louisiana, by Mrs. Harriett Flower Mathews of Greenwood Plantation.

Left—Landrethii; below—variety not known.



In the old churchyard of Grace Episcopal Church in St. Francisville a number of beautiful camellias are growing, some of which were planted there in ante-bellum times. These are Alba Plena, Sarah Frost and a small variegated red and white double. Others, plants of Alba Plena and Fimbriata, belong to somewhat later years. These camellias of the Grace churchyard are mentioned in Dr. H. Harold Hume's fine book on camellias.

It is a joy to grow camellias in this old parish. The soil is acid, the moisture is abundant and the season brings weather cold enough to stiffen the flowers. To have given beauty and delight for a hundred seasons is a wonderful thing, and these old trees that still bloom in our gardens are both a link with the past and a joy in the present.

JACKSONVILLE'S OLD CAMELLIAS

MRS. W. E. McARTHUR, Jacksonville, Florida

THE phenomenal development of new varieties of *Camellia japonica*, together with the enthusiasm manifested therein, has overshadowed, for the time being, interest in the few old camellia plants present in this locality. It is believed, therefore, that an account of these old camellias will be of service to camellia growers who are interested in the varieties, their names and ages, as well as the story behind them.

By 1937 there were enough camellias growing in this general area to warrant the holding of a camellia show in Jacksonville. This show was held at the Woman's Club on January 26 under the auspices of the Garden Club of Jacksonville.

In an article written by the late Miss Eleanor Rawson for "Garden Notes" in 1937, there appeared a number of comments about old camellia plants in this locality. Reference was made to the lovely camellias on the property of Mr. Walter Kipp on the corner of Liberty and Newman streets where, as far back as 1873, rose, pink, white and other colored blooms appeared among the glossy leaves of the plants; to the property on the corner of Church and Market streets owned by the Rt. Rev. John Freeman Young, the first Bishop of Florida, who, during the course of his many travels,