

Congrès ... la recherche est une longue patience ...

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Camellias in Ireland

Camélias en Irlande

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Le camellie in Irlanda

MARY FORREST and JOHN TOOBY

See colour section

Ireland's mild temperate climate allows for the cultivation of a wide range of trees and shrubs. The average mid winter temperatures remain above freezing while the difference between winter and mid-summer average temperatures varies between 10°C and 11°C. Rainfall is heaviest in the mountainous region along the western seaboard and ranges from more than 1600mm in these areas to less than 800mm in an area around Dublin on the eastern seaboard. Wind can be a problem in some gardens and shelter from the predominant south westerly wind is necessary.

Camellias have been cultivated in Ireland since the early 19th century. In 1815 John Nash designed and constructed a Camellia House at **Shanes Castle**, Co. Antrim, the property of the 1st Earl O'Neill. Built in the style of an eighteenth century orangery with glass panels on one side of the building, it was planted with red, white and pink camellias. In May 1983 they were still magnificent but presented a formidable problem of identification; 'Alba Plena', 'Doncklaeri' and 'Elegans' are there for sure. They have now grown into broad hedges 6m high, reminiscent of the camellia hedges in the Jardin des Plantes at Nantes in France.

In 1829 a correspondent to the Gardeners Magazine described a visit to Castlemartyr Co. Cork, where *Camellia japonica* was in cultivation both outdoors and under glass. In the 1850's the 4th Earl Shannon planted a collection of tender camellias and a pinetum. All that remained in 1982 were a few decrepit conifers but no camellias.

The Great Palm House in the National Botanic Gardens was built in 1883, with wings

to the right and left, the Orchid House and Camellia House respectively. Since camellias grow well outdoors at Glasnevin, the house is now used to display Geraniums and flowering house plants with a few Camellias remaining in the central bed, namely 'Alba Plena', 'Tricolor', 'Adolphe Audusson' and *C. reticulata*. In 1976 a collection of some 30 cultivars was planted in a small circular garden with the Wilson 50 Azaleas and Heathers. At the time of writing (June 1983) 'Joseph Pfingstl', 'Are-Jishi', 'Beverley Caffin' and 'Mary Larcom' were still in bloom.

The most extensive camellia collection in the country is at **Mount Congreve**. Situated on the banks of the river Suir, a few miles west of Waterford city, the hundred acre garden, developed and planted by Mr Ambrose Congreve and recently given by him to the Irish nation, is one of the largest gardens in Ireland. The original steeply sloped woodland garden, with common oak *Quercus robur* evergreen oak, *Q. ilex* and beech *Fagus sylvatica*, has been transformed, since 1965, into an Exbury style garden, while the house has been lovingly restored by local craftsmen. Rhododendrons, magnolias and camellias predominate, planted in groups of tens, twenties or even greater numbers to create a bold colour effect. Specimen trees, both deciduous and coniferous, and some extensive lawns serve as a foil for the colourful shrubs. They also conceal what is beyond, inviting one to explore a little further along the many paths. Most of the camellias have been planted in a woodland area south west of the house. The collection numbers some 415 different cultivars, including forms of *Camellia japonica*, *C. reticulata* and

C. × williamsii. The only species represented is *C. sasanqua*. This comprehensive collection contains some of the older *C. japonica* cultivars such as 'Elegans' (1831) 'Alba Simplex' (1849) 'Contessa Lavinia Maggi' (1860) and 'Kelvingtonia' (1856). In an area bordered by a hedge of *Rhododendron* 'Elizabeth' several plants each of 'Lady de Saumarez', 'Nagasaki', 'Joshua E. Youtz', and 'Hana Fuki' are in cultivation. 'Joseph Pfingstl' is outstanding, being very free with its high formal double flowers of deep red, and was still flowering at the end of June. In an adjoining area, camellias have been planted in association with *Podocarpus* species. *Podocarpus andinus*, *P. totara*, *P. salignus* and *P. macrophyllus* with *Camellia* 'Butterfly', 'Crimson Robe', 'Carters Sunburst', 'Tiny Princess' and 'China Lady', give an unusual contrast of colour and foliage types. As one continues through the collection the list of cultivars reads like a nurseryman's catalogue. Indeed many plants from the garden are propagated in the garden's nursery. All the plants are labelled, giving plant name and in most cases, year of planting and country of origin.

Camellia × williamsii do particularly well at Mount Congreve. Cultivars in cultivation include 'J. C. Williams', 'Caerhays', 'George Blandford', 'Mary Larcom', and 'St. Ewe'. Of the Australian hybrids, 'Charles Colbert', 'Farfalla' and 'Tiptoe' were doing well. 'Elsie Jury' and 'Anticipation' from New Zealand were wreathed in bloom in May 1983. Another Jury hybrid 'Debbie' was in flower nearby. The American 'Freedom Bell', of slow growth but very free, with dark red cup shaped flowers similar to *Magnolia × soulangiana* cv 'Lennei' was in bloom not far away. Some *Camellia reticulata* hybrids have already been mentioned; others which thrive in this garden are 'Francie L', 'Chang's Temple', 'William Hertrich', doing particularly well, and 'Felice Harris'. One of the tallest growing cultivars in the collection is 'Barbara Hillier', nearly 4m high. Its satin pink flowers first appeared in February and it was still in bloom in May. Opposite the house in an area recently cleared, single specimens have been planted. These include *C. sasanqua* 'Setsugekka' and *C. rusticana* 'Itsukamachi'. So far they have proved hardy at Mount Congreve. Others recently planted include, 'Grand Prix', 'Silver Triumph', 'Dr Clifford Parks' and 'John Taylor'. Mr Congreve does not confine his planting to Mount Congreve. In November 1982 he presented a collection of 90 camellias to St.

James Park in London. Another garden to receive plants from Mr Congreve is **Rossdohan** in Co. Kerry. Situated on the Kenmare River in the south western corner of the country, Rossdohan was bought by Ralph and Philip Walker in 1955. Together with their families they transformed the garden into a plantsman's paradise. Their recent deaths are a grievous loss to Irish gardening and to the I.C.S. The semi tropical climate is ideally suitable for the cultivation of many Australasian trees and shrubs. Winds are kept at bay by screens of conifers and bamboos. *Acacia melanoxylon*, *Clethra arborea*, *Myrtus apiculata*, and the Tree Ferns *Dicksonia antarctica* and *Cyathea dealbata* freely seed themselves in the moist rocky soil. Ferns indeed are the feature here. Most of the camellias are confined to an area bordered by a gravel path, aptly known as the Camellia Triangle. A representative collection of some 40 cultivars with various colours and flower forms have been planted. These include a nice plant of *C. cuspidata*, many of the old favourites, and others such as 'Adelina Patti', 'Citation' and 'Alexander Hunter', while more recent plantings include 'Arch of Triumph', 'Dr Louis Pollizzi', 'Fortyniner', 'Francie L', 'Innovation', and 'Royalty', the last two doing particularly well. Some plants have set seed and one wonders what new cultivar might emerge from these capsules.

Camellias were planted in several other gardens in Victorian times, often in conservatories in the north but also in the open, especially in the south. One such is Lismore Castle owned by the Duke of Devonshire. They did so well that he brought over a number from the conservatories at Chatsworth about 20 years ago.

One of the most fascinating gardens in Ireland is **Fota**, on an island a few miles south east of Cork. Now run by University College Cork, this is a splendid large garden with mature trees providing adequate shelter. It holds a bewildering collection of exotic trees and shrubs which include a number of camellias, which have been planted at intervals since the late 1930's. In 1961 a collection of two plants each of 16 varieties was received from the Companhia Horticolo-Agricola Portuense of Porto (Oporto), Portugal. Unfortunately these are not labelled but one is recorded as "Japonica Portuense" and this can be identified as the plant with variegated leaves which is labelled "Variegata". In this climate it is a first-class variegated shrub as such forms are in Japan, quite unlike the spindly specimens sometimes

seen struggling in English gardens. Fota may well have been the sources of some of the camellias growing in other gardens near Cork such as I.C.S. member Finbarr Dowdall's garden at **Dunsland**, which is only a few miles away. There are a few old plants here. Bold plantings have recently been made here in a thinly wooded dingle. Well as cultivars of *C. japonica* do in the Cork area hybrids often do even better, such as 'Anticipation', 'Donation', 'E. G. Waterhouse', 'Elsie Jury', 'Inspiration', and 'Salutation'. 'Yoibijin' is the only one that seeds regularly at Dunsland and it is also regular at Knockreer, the entrance of which is near Killarney Cathedral.

One of the most important gardens in Ireland is **Muckross Abbey**, in Bourn Vincent National Park, a few miles out of Killarney, in a romantic situation beside Lough Leane. Now the property of the Irish nation, it has been restored to its former glory, under the direction of Cormac Foley. Under the new regime the gardens are being expanded and generous plantings of camellias have recently been made in the adjoining woodlands.

Also run by the National Parks and Monuments Service is another of the most important gardens in Ireland, **Ilnacullin** on Garinish Island in Bantry Bay near Glengariff in west Cork. This too is in an idyllic situation with views of sea and mountains. The garden was created by Annan Bryce and his family between 1910 and 1953, when it passed into public ownership. The magnitude of the task they undertook is quite staggering. Rocks had to be blasted and vast quantities of soil had to be brought in and shelter belts planted before serious work on a garden could begin. Then Harold Peto was brought in to design an Italian garden which is the centrepiece. For the greater part of the Bryce family's development of Ilnacullin they had the assistance of a great Scottish gardener, Murdo Mackenzie, whose recent death has been widely mourned. The garden contains many very interesting plants including a good representative collection of camellias. *C. reticulata* cultivars predominate in the walled garden and include 'Buddha', 'Early Peony', 'Mary Williams', 'Robert Fortune', 'Shot Silk' and 'Wild Silk'. Also in west Cork is **Creagh** near Skibbereen, where Mr Barry has a good collection of camellias including some Italian varieties as well as the more familiar cultivars.

In County Down the great gardens at **Mount Stewart**, **Rowallane** and **Castlewellan** all have small plantings of camellias. No doubt because of the cooler summers it is noticeable that while

C. × williamsii and similar hybrids flower well, most cultivars of *C. japonica* are disappointingly shy. This applies too in the Belfast Parks and in I.C.S. member John Matthews' small garden in Ballymena.

Quite recently plantings of camellias have been made in central Ireland as in Major C. D. Cholmeley-Harrisons' garden at Emo in County Laois. Our impression here again was that hybrids were much more floriferous.

As in England, the number of camellia species in cultivation in Irish gardens is not large, **Mount Usher** in Ashford Co. Wicklow having the largest selection, with 4 species. This Robinson style garden dates from 1890. Three generations of the Walpole family cared for the garden until 1980, when it was bought by Mrs Madeleine Jay. Down through the years detailed planting records have been kept. From this source we learn that *C. sasanqua* was planted in 1896, supplied by Veitch of Chelsea. In 1913 they sent *C. cuspidata* to Mount Usher. *C. reticulata* was planted in 1910, supplied by Smith of Newry, Co. Down. This plant was presumably 'Captain Rawes' which is still doing well. 'Mary Williams' has since been planted. Of later introduction was *C. saluenensis* donated to the garden in 1950 by the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. All these species are still in cultivation. Some camellia cultivars were also planted, 'Alba Simplex', 'Coquetti', 'Sylvia' and 'Donation'. Years ago two camellias were planted on either side of a narrow path. They have grown together and formed an arch, through which visitors may walk, and at the same time admire the shell pink flowers of 'Magnoliaeflora' and the rose pink flowers of the fishtail camellia 'C. F. Coates'.

A start with camellias has been made at the **J. F. Kennedy Park** near New Ross, Co. Wexford. Their first plantings include forms of three species *C. cuspidata*, *C. reticulata* and *C. saluenensis*. Also near New Ross is **Kilmokea**, home of I.C.S. Members, Lt. Col. & Mrs David Price. A boggy valley has been transformed into an extension of the garden with a small lake and stream. Although they began planting only 17 years ago, they have an interesting collection of camellias which includes *C. tsaii* which is usually seen under glass in England. At Ashbourne House Hotel near Cork is an interesting garden, which includes the tea plant, *C. sinensis*.

To sum up, the coastal counties of southern and eastern Ireland from Kerry round to Dublin enjoy a maritime climate very well suited to camellias, the main hazard being wind. The

soils too seem favourable. Even here, however, cultivars of *C. japonica* are on the whole less floriferous than are hybrids. The performance of both types varies of course from cultivar to cultivar. In the central counties such as Laois and Offaly the difference was more pronounced as it was in counties Antrim and Down in Northern Ireland.

The flower forms of some cultivars were unfamiliar: 'Adolphe Audusson' and 'Apollo' often had paeony form flowers while those of 'Joseph Pfingstl' were formal double. 'Elegans' too, tends to come formal.

Interestingly we saw a plant of 'Inspiration' looking magnificent in full flower in the middle of a modest roadside garden between Killarney and Skibbereen. This surely points to the more

general use of camellias by Irish gardeners in the future.

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Note:

A number of the gardens referred to in this article are included in an inventory of trees and shrubs cultivated in major Irish Gardens. This project was undertaken by Mary Forrest under the auspices of An Taisce, the National Trust for Ireland.

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