

HISTORY OF CAMELLIAS

ANN RICHARDSON
HUNTINGTON BOTANICAL GARDENS
SAN MARINO, California, U.S.A.

Histoire Des Camélias

Die Geschichte Der Kamélien

La Storia Delle Camélie

Historia De Las Camélias

Plants of the Genus *Camellias* grow naturally over a large area of southeast Asia, China, Japan, Indochina, Burma and Assam. The history of two very important species, *Camellia Japonica* and *Camellia Sinensis*, are briefly explained here beginning with their discovery in Asia and their introduction to Europe. This brief overview will end at the close of the 19th century.

CHINA AND TEA

Camellias in the west are prized as Ornamental Plants but in other areas of the world, they are cultivated for other purposes as well.

C. Sinensis, the tea plant, originated in China where tea drinking goes back to approximately the third century.

Tea drinking was first introduced into Europe in the early 17th century and the tea trade was carried on on a large scale through the 18th century. The importation of tea from China was costly and attempts were made to import plants and seeds to cultivate tea closer to home. However, few survived the long voyages. In 1819, John Livingston of the East India Company complained that only one plant in one thousand was expected to survive the four to six month voyages from China. Those that did live often died in colder areas of Europe.

The *Camellias* that made it through the voyages turned out to be *C. Sinensis*. Whether Chinese officials were being purposeful or not, they must have realized that once exported, the tea plants would be propagated and grown for profit elsewhere.

In 1848, the East India Company sent plant collector, Robert Fortune to China to collect plants and seeds and to recruit some expert tea makers for the purpose of establishing a tea industry in India under British control. Today tea is one of the largest and most successful industries in Sri Lanka and India.

The tea industry never met with much success in the new world, due largely to high labor costs which resulted from hand picking and processing of the leaves. Presently, the only tea producer in the United States is the Charleston Tea Plantation in South Carolina which was established in 1987.

JAPAN

Camellia Japonica, the species most widely cultivated over the longest period of time, has nearly 30,000 known cultivars. It originates in Japan, as its name indicates, but it is also found in the Southwestern provinces of China where numbers of garden forms or cultivars originated. The first garden forms of *C. Japonica* to arrive in Europe came from China. But these same forms were also commonly cultivated in Japan and so probably originated there.

The influence of the *Camellia* in Japan can be seen clearly in legend and in lasting traditions, symbolizing longevity, friendship, elegance and harmony. The simple single *Camellia* blooms are an essential part of the tea ceremony during late winter months and early spring when other flowering plants are dormant. Historically, in many famous temples of Kyoto, *Camellias* were traditionally

planted by Imperial family members and have survived over 500 years - to this day, in season, flowers are often scattered before the sanctuary of Buddhist Temples. Camellias appear both in modern and ancient books. On Kimonos and other Fabrics, fans, scrolls, lacquered trays, ceramics and other art objects.

The beauty of Japanese plants has fascinated Western gardeners for centuries. But Japan's ports were closed to foreigners for many years, between 1624 - 1853/54. Only the Dutch were able to maintain limited trade. In 1695, Engelbert Kaempfer, a German doctor and naturalist with the East India Company, managed to bring back from Japan a collection of azaleas, camellias and tree peonies that stunned botanists in Europe.

Shoguns carefully watched the movements of early European traders and explorers, plant collectors, therefore, were at extreme risk to remove any plant material. A slow stream of plants did, however, manage to trickle from Japan to Europe and eventually to the U. S. It wasn't until 1853 that the presence of Commodore Pery's American warships in Tokyo Bay forced Japan to open trade with the West.

Japanese cultivars of *C. Japonica* introduced to Europe were the oldest in the world. They had been selected and reselected over more than a thousand years, some confined to particular areas, creating quite distinctive forms not found elsewhere. Many that were introduced in Europe and the United States had their original Japanese names changed to Western names.

EUROPE - ENGLAND

The first recorded Camellia material to arrive in Europe came at the end of the 17th Century when James Cunningham, a physician stationed at an East India Company Factory on the island of Amoy off the coast of China, sent dried herbarium specimens to James Petiver, an apothecary and botanist in London. In 1702, Petiver illustrated Cunningham's Camellia in a pamphlet.

In 1739, a semi-double red camellia was reported growing in the glasshouses of Lord Petre at Thorndon Hall, Essex. A drawing in 1745 of a camellia at

Thorndon was called the "Chinese Rose," probably referring to its Chinese origin.

Around 1780, there are scattered reports of camellias appearing in Europe and interest was sparked particularly when collections of drawings of camellias in double and formal forms were imported from China by the East India Company.

The date most frequently cited for the appearance of two cultivars whose names and existence are familiar to this day is 1792, "Alba Plena" and "Variegated" arrived in England from China as living plants for the brothers John and Gilbert Slater. "Alba Plena", a white formal flower, is still available today at nurseries. "Variegata" an extremely rare cultivar is a common flower described as a semi-double, deep pink blotched white. Both cultivars are grown on grounds of the Huntington Botanical Gardens.

Most importations went to England and quickly spread throughout the continent appearing on nursery catalogue lists in France, Belgium, Italy and Portugal. Importations slowed due to the increase of European seedling cultivars. Unfortunately, camellias in England rarely produced seed. Most new cultivars came from Italy and other European countries.

PORTUGAL

The history of Camellias introduced into England is well documented but for other European countries it is quite sketchy.

The pioneering efforts of Portuguese sea captains and merchants making contact with China date to 1516. Although sea captains and explorers must have been aware of camellias, there is no record of their returning plants to Europe. There are, however, very old camellia plants in both Portugal and Spain. A garden in Oporto, Portugal, has three very large specimens with single red flowers and a combined canopy spread of 150 square yards. The age of these plants has been in question for many years, the most probable estimate of their age is about 200 years. Camellias found their way into many private gardens and areas that had favorable growing conditions. Nursery catalogs of the mid to late 1800's show entries of hundred of cultivars, attesting to

their popularity.

SPAIN

In Spain, camellias are not looked upon as exotic plants, having long been established in farms, along roads, in the countryside and in cities. Many are 25 feet tall, a sure sign of age and stature.

GERMANY

Winters in Germany are too severe for camellias to survive unprotected. A *C. Japonica* 200 years old survives and blooms in a Dresden Park in Pillnitz Castle, but it is protected by a heated glasshouse in the cold season. It measures 27 feet tall, 33 feet wide, bears no cultivar name but produces small red single flowers typical of seedlings.

G. F. Seidel, a German botanist and nurseryman, imported a camellia from Japan in 1893 and changed its name from "Usu-Otome" to "Frau Minna Siedel." When it was introduced later in Sacramento, California, it's name was again changed to "Pink Perfection." This is the oldest camellia on the Huntington property. It is over 100 years old. The cultivar is still popular and available in the nursery trade today.

BELGIUM

The camellia was the favorite flower of King Leopold who came to the Belgium Throne in 1865 and started an ambitious building compound of glasshouses at the Royal Palace at Lenken. Reputed to have one of the most beautiful collections of rare plants in Europe, King Leopold houses the camellia collection in a separate "specialist" glasshouse. This fine royal collection survived two world wars and the glasshouses still exist.

FRANCE

In France, the first camellia was presented to Josephine Beauharnais, wife of Napoleon, in 1700 and planted in her famous garden at La Maison. The popularity of camellias spread fast, and they became the symbol of luxury and fashion. They were worn as boutonnières by gentlemen or in corsages by the ladies in the mid 19th Century.

Alexander Dumas Fils' famous story,

La Dame Aux Camellias, portrayed a lovely but doomed Lady of Pleasure, who wore white camellias on the days of her availability, the novel created a scandal - it was turned into a popular play and then became Verdi's Opera La Traviata which premiered in Venice in 1853.

ITALY

The Camellia entered Italy via the Court of Naples where it was introduced by Lady Hamilton. She was friend to Lord Nelson, who in turn was the friend of Lord Petre, the Englishman who in 1745 received some of the earliest recorded plants.

During the middle of the 19th century camellias were very popular with collectors and horticulturists. In 1856, many new releases were introduced from Italian sources. The Roman Villa Doria Pamphilj listed 57 different camellia cultivars growing on the grounds, a total of 500 plants. In 1969, there were only five.

By the end of the 19th century, the craze for camellias waned in Europe. Their decline may be attributed to the deterioration of international relationships and poor economic conditions. It was the end of the age of formal elegance and the cost of maintaining conservatories. Where many camellias were grown, became difficult, few new cultivars appeared and nurseries kept numbers to a minimum.

OTHER CAMELLIA PRODUCTS

Besides harvesting the leaves of *C. Sinensis* for tea, another quality product from Camellia plants is a fine grade oil extracted from the seeds of *C. Sinensis* for tea. Another quality product from camellia plants is a fine oil extracted from the seeds of *C. Sasanqua*, *C. Japonica* and *C. Oleifers*, used in China and Japan for cosmetics and cooking.

In its homelands, the camellias' red flowers have been used in dyeing. The dense camellia wood is burned for heat and light and when processed, produces a high grade charcoal used for fuel. The accessibility and toughness of the wood widened its use for many tools, agricultural implements and formerly, for weapons.