The Sweet Potato State
How our Thanksgiving favorite became the state vegetable PAGE 140

Of the 13 million sweet potatoes harvested each year in North Carolina, only this one looks like its home state.
CAROLINA GARDENING

WHAT WINTER BRINGS

The camellia blooms at a time when other plants sleep. And for a club in Wilmington, those blooms are all they need to get them through the season.

BY TIM BASS | PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOSHUA CURRY
Richard Buggeln darts down the concrete path at the New Hanover County Arboretum in Wilmington then stamps across the grass. He bypasses the garden's excellent dogwoods and elms. He ignores an elegant weeping redbud and a sprawling devil's trumpet. He gives nary a look to the azaleas, chrysanthemums, goldenrod, and phlox.

Buggeln has no time for them. He's on the hunt for his plant of passion: the camellia.

He cuts through a bed of mulch and pauses at a dark green shrub with lustrous little leaves.

"This is a 'sasanqua,'" he says, his fingers brushing one of the branches.

He admires the bush, checks it for signs of disease, then heads toward more camellias.
When the camellia show comes around, club members like Bill Howell choose their best blooms to cut.

“This is one of my favorites,” he says of a thigh-high bush heavy with glossy leaves edged by tiny saw teeth. “It’s called ‘mathotiana.’”

He pushes on to a small camellia rebounding after recent decline.

“This one has come back like gangbusters,” Buggeln says.

He, along with his wife, Betty Gail, and the other members of Wilmington’s Tidewater Camellia Club, feels a responsibility toward the 40 plants that grace the arboretum’s Camellia Walk. The 78-member club — a mix of old-timers and newcomers, experts and novices, a handful of native Wilmingtonians and a batch of Northern transplants — has a mission of celebrating and propagating the beloved camellia.

In Wilmington, a city with an annual festival that honors the azalea and an impressive arboretum along Oleander Drive, this club cares a lot about the evergreen camellia, with its cold-weather blooms that grow as big as saucers in breathtaking shades of pink, red, and white. Club members tally more than a thousand camellias among them, plus countless seedlings.

“I just always liked them blooming in the winter,” says Carla Strickland, the club’s secretary. “When you get to February, that’s when the daffodils come up. The camellias are blooming, and the forsythia starts coming out. That always made me think spring was on the way.”

The folks in the Tidewater club love the way camellias color the landscape in the grayest days of the year. They say if you plant a mix of camellias with staggered bloom cycles — the ‘sasanqua’ for autumn flowers lasting into December, the ‘japonica’ and ‘reticulata’ for winter blossoms that stay until spring — your yard will blush with color while most other plants stand bare and brown.

“You can have camellias from September until almost April,” says club member Jackie Garelick. “I just love the fact that something blooms in the winter that is gorgeous.”

Hundreds and hundreds

The camellia is an Asian native that showed up in America by way of Europe in the late 18th century. Early traders found the camellia desirable for a couple of reasons: the enchanting blooms that earned the plant the nickname Japanese rose and the tea that comes from the young leaves of the ‘sinensis’ variety.

Named in honor of a Jesuit botanist and pharmacist, Georg Joseph Kamel, the
The ‘fircone variegated’ is one of the smallest varieties of camellias. And it’s one of almost 400 bushes that Ed and Lou Powers have at their home along Hewletts Creek in Wilmington. Another is the soft pink ‘Tammia.’

camellia seems like a natural Southerner today — it abhors severe cold and flourishes in mild climates with slightly acidic, well-drained soil. Above Virginia, most camellias are grown in greenhouses.

The Tidewater Camellia Club began in the early 1950s as a gardening group for men. Eventually the men narrowed their focus to camellias. Many of the members from the North had never seen camellias until they came south. When Betty Gail and Richard Buggeln moved from Connecticut in 2004 and discovered blooms dangling from five shrubs outside their new home in Wilmington, they thought some neighbor must have glued them on as a joke. Once they learned the blooms were real, they became intrigued.

“We went from five to 117 camellias,” Betty Gail says. “I guess we got excited, huh?”

Bill Wilcox, a club member for 23 years, admits, “I didn’t know how to spell camellia until I retired. I don’t remember ever seeing a camellia in Ohio.”

Now he has 68 of them. Some club members don’t have a precise number for how many they own. They grow so many camellias that they estimate the total. Ed Powers hasn’t counted in a couple of years, but he figures he has between 350 and 375 camellias. Gena and E.W. Fredrickson suppose they have 250, but the number keeps changing because they keep planting. Eighty-four-year-old Alma Buffkin cares for 200 to 300 mature plants, plus a thousand potted seedlings. John Talley, who’s 88, tends between 130 and 160 camellias. He grows some in a greenhouse so small it’s called the phone booth.

Not all club members are big growers, though. Mike Savalli has 20 camellias, Kathy Connolly five, and Jackie Garelick just one.

Judith Segasture, the club president, lived in California for 30 years and took camellias for granted there. Then she moved to Wilmington, bought a house, and found herself the sudden owner of 10 camellias. She joined the Tidewater club for help.

“I just wanted to make sure that I didn’t kill them,” she says. “I had no idea how elaborate and exotic they could be. That was a big surprise for me down here. It’s pretty spectacular.”

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“They used to say that the camellia was a lazy-man’s flower,” says Buffkin, who many call the Camellia Lady.
Selecting the best

Every winter in the heart of camellia season, the club holds its big show and sale, giving the members a chance to promote camellias through educational sessions, a showcase of flower artwork by 150 students, and the stunning display of blooms — some in single rows, some in double rows, some in peony forms or anemone or rose.

And they compete. Growers from up and down the East Coast bring hundreds of prized blooms with names such as 'royal velvet,' 'midnight magic,' and 'pink perfection.' The 2012 show included more than 1,300 flowers. The winners, selected by a certified team of judges from out of town, included best bloom, best miniature, and best seedling.

The competition gets serious. All winter camellia contestants watch the weather, and when a cold snap threatens, they decide whether to cover their plants or chance them in the elements. The call matters; merely tossing a sheet over a camellia on a frosty night shifts a contest entry into a different category for protected blooms.

Weeks before the contest, some of the hardiest competitors take to the practice of “gibbing.” They gingerly doctor select blooms with a droplet of gibberellic acid, a plant hormone that can produce a flower as big as a bowl.

‘Refreshments’

Some Tidewater members have no interest in competing. They belong to the club for its educational and social benefits, drawn by the friendships and family air. This group is a casual, talkative bunch. Members look forward to regular parties and any covered-dish dinner that includes Alma Buffkin’s 10-layer chocolate cake. Club members speak often of “refreshments.”

“The first time I came to this club,” Matt Hunter says, “everybody told me, ‘We’re going to teach you all about camellias. And we’re about to have a club party.’ This was worth investigating.”

Hunter is now president of the 3,000-member American Camellia Society, headquartered in Fort Valley, Georgia. In addition to the Tidewater club, the ACS lists seven other member organizations from North Carolina, stretching from Charlotte to New Bern. The main ACS building is named in honor of a veteran North Carolina camellia grower, Annabelle Lundy Fetterman of Clinton.

Hunter is the fourth Tidewater club member to rise to the national presidency; that’s twice as many as any other club in the country. In the past three years, Tidewater members have registered five ACS blooms, including two named in honor of wives — E.W. Fredrickson’s ‘Gena Owens Fredrickson’ and John Talley’s ‘Melissa Beale Talley.’

“He fell in love with any camellias, as most men love them, and I fell for his daylilies,” Melissa Talley says. “We have spent many happy hours in our large garden.”

Learning to grow

Men ran the Tidewater Camellia Club until the mid-1970s, when they first admitted women. Today women make up 70 percent of the membership.

“We had some of the older members who worried about the club becoming dominated by women,” Hunter says. “So a few years ago we had a nominating committee composed of three men. We got together, and we started looking down the list of members who would make good officers, and we ended up nominating all women. And one of the men on the nominating committee was one of these guys who was worried about the women taking over.”

Typical club meetings include food and drink, planning for the big annual show, guest speakers, and lots of camellia talk. E.W. Fredrickson explains how he fertilizes with pigeon manure. Kathy Connolly and Betty Gail Buggeln show off corsages of artificial camellia blooms that look like they just came off the bush. Ed Powers, a club member for more than 30 years, beams as he talks about the friendly competition and the quest for perfect blooms.

“Tidewater Camellia Club
Show & Sale

November 17, Noon - 4 p.m.
Free admission.
New Hanover County Arboretum
6206 Oleander Drive
Wilmington, N.C. 28403
For more information, call (910) 452-6393, or visit tidewatercamelliaclub.org.

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