



# *The Camellia*

*Queen of the Winter Flowers*

*A Brief History*

# From Asia to America

- China
- Japan
- Portugal 1550 or 1808?
- England 1739
- Italy 1760
- Belgium 1809
- France 1819
- Germany 1813
- Australia and New Zealand 1831
- America 1650 NY/1776 Boston/1797 NJ
- Wars and revolutions
- Victorian era of camellias
- Current events

# China

Indigenous camellia species growing 5000 years ago. Legend tells of Chinese Emperor in 2737 BC finding a leaf of *Camellia sinensis* had fallen into boiling water. The resulting beverage now known as tea was tasty and invigorating and became a very popular drink by 206 AD. Manufactured by 332 AD and national drink by 618 AD.

Strict tea etiquette and ceremonies evolved.



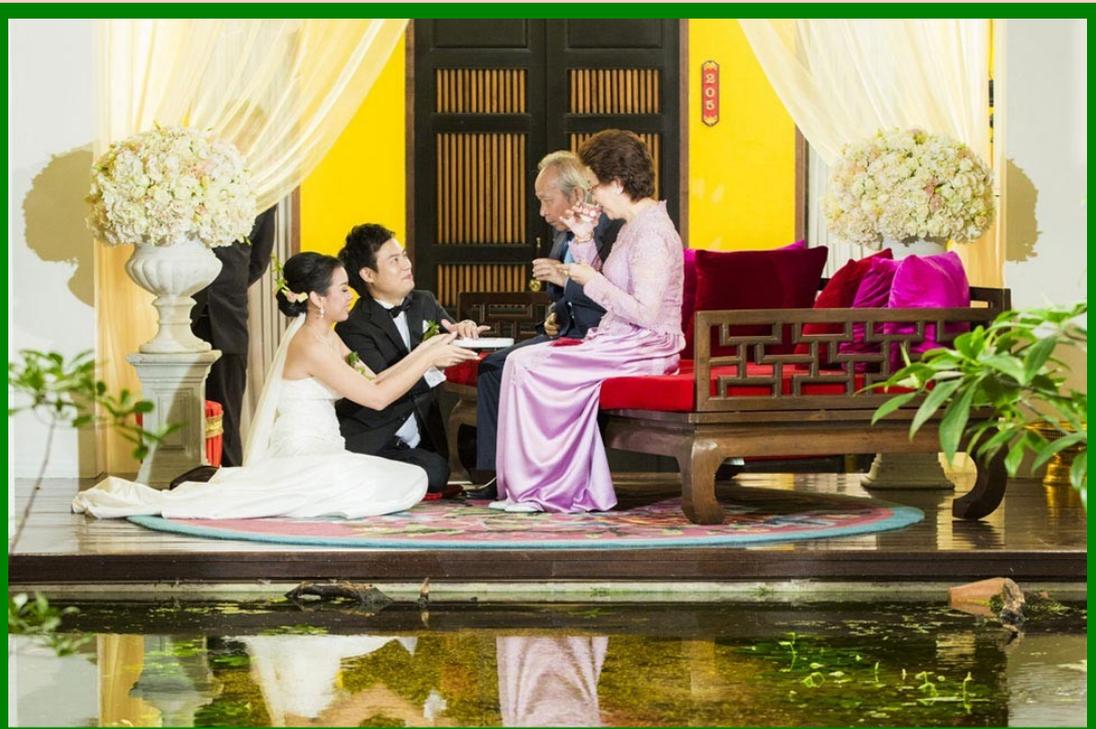
Chinese Tea House

# Japan

Indigenous as well as carried from China by Buddhist monks in 8<sup>th</sup> century. The economic value was in oil from seeds of *Camellia oleifera* as well as tea leaves of *C. sinensis*. Large beautiful plants and unusual flowers of yet to be named *Camellia japonicas* and *sasanquas* produced no seeds, Although these were of no value to subsistence farmers, camellias were cultivated as ornamental plants grown in pots and gardens by wealthy landowners and thus symbols of status and power. Propagated from cuttings in seaport towns where Europeans first found them, acquired economic and aesthetic value.



*Camellia sinensis*.



Chinese Wedding  
Tea Ceremony

Japanese  
Tea Ceremony



# From Asia to England and Europe - Formalities

- Columbus discovers America 1492, opens world trade routes.
- Dutch arrive in East Indies 1596. Lucrative trade and rivalries.
- British East India Company 1600s, Queen Elizabeth I and King James.
- 17<sup>th</sup> century trade between Europe and China created interest in Asian plants with shipments of plants and seeds sent back to Europe. *C. sinensis* would grow only in Asia.
- *C. sasanqua* and *C. japonica* discovered in Chusan, China, in 1701
- 1735 Carolus Linnaeus, MD, of Sweden, world's most famous botanist at the time, named the *Camellus* after George Joseph Kamel, a Jesuit missionary, pharmacist, and botanist. Kamel had died in 1706 , and there is no evidence that he ever saw a *camellia*.
- Englebert Kaempfer, German MD and ship's surgeon in 1712, documented plants observed during his travels in a 900 page book, with 25 identified as *C. japonica* and *C. sasanqua*.
- Linnaeus, in 1753, officially named the *japonica*, *sasanqua*, and *sinensis*.

# European Camellia Cultivation

- **Portugal**: May have arrived as early as 16<sup>th</sup> century based on early trade routes. Actually got first plants in 1808.
- **England**: First living plants grown in 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Alba Plena cultivated by 1792.
- **Belgium**: Ghent Flower Show exhibited 2 plants in 1808. By 1850, over 700 varieties were displayed.
- **France**: Abbe Berlese had raised 100 plants from seeds of Caserta plants in 1819. Became a great social success.
- **Germany**: Plants arrived from England in 1771 and were still protected and flowering in 1801. More imported from France in 1813.
- **Australia & New Zealand**: 1834 missionaries cultivated plants and souls amongst Maori cannibals.
- **Italy**: Sasanquas cultivated in royal gardens of Caserta in 1760.



# Portugal

- Unconfirmed import of 3 *C. japonicas* probably arrived from Japan in Campo Bello, Portugal, about 1550, as trade routes were established as early as 1501. More likely, the first camellias arrived in 1808 and still survive today, one of 3 oldest camellias in Europe. Camellias were a symbol of social and economic power, and a mandatory presence in every garden in the 1800s. Gardens and camellia shows are extremely popular today.



# England



- *The Peacock Pheasant From China* published in 1745 by George Edwards in England. He identified the flower as the Chinese Rose, the first living specimens in England grown by Essex noble Lord Petrie as early as 1739.
- Camellias were thought to be tropical and fragile, so perished when grown in coal heated stove houses.
- 1792 Capt. Connor of the East India Company brought 2 camellias - Alba Plena and Variagata - to England. Many more followed, and seedlings were cultivated.
- The first *C. reticulata* was brought to England in 1820 from China by Capt. Richard Rawes. More followed and still survive.
- Stove plants were replaced with elaborate glasshouses, and hardy outdoor varieties were developed.

Chiswick Glasshouse in London  
over 300 feet long, built in 1813  
still home to several original plants from 1828.



# Italy

- First camellia was probably *C. sasanqua* planted in 1760 in royal gardens of Caserta.

# Belgium

- First Ghent Flower Show was held in a cabaret in 1809 where 2 *C. japonicas* were shown. By 1820, 44 camellias were exhibited. In 1850, a local nursery offered 700 varieties.
- Largest nursery completely bombed out during WWII, but rebuilt by 1950 with 75,000 camellias in stock.
- Below, espaliered camellias in overlapping V shaped Belgian fence.



# France

- Camellias scored great social success in fashion, wealth, and art. A boutonniere or corsage was an expensive but necessary accessory.
- Abbe Berlese in 1819 raised 100 plants from famous tree at Caserta, Italy. Authored descriptions and color illustrations of camellias. In contemplating developing new species in 1845, he concluded that the *C. japonica* had then produced all varieties possible.

Alexandre Dumas fils penned *La Dame aux Camélias* in 1848, an account of the brief life of celebrated courtesan and Dumas' lover, the flower being the symbol of a lady's availability. The book became an instant stage success, and subsequently adapted by Verdi in his ever popular opera *La Traviata*, and later film.

Sarah Bernhardt as Camille, 1882.



# Germany

- Nurseryman Jacob Seidel brought plants from Paris to Dresden in 1813. Within 30 years he had 100,000 potted plants under glass and 1000 cultivars which he sold in Vienna, Budapest, St. Petersburg, Madrid, Florence, and Central America.
- The most famous German camellia in the Pillnitz palace gardens was planted in 1801 and probably came from England in 1771. It is 40 feet in diameter and 30 feet tall, producing thousands of blooms every spring and sheltered under glass during winters.



# Australia & New Zealand

- Europeans first settled in Australia in 1770. Camellias arrived in February 1831 from England, a gift to William Macarthur who propagated hundreds and named 69 of them.
- Plants arrived about 1834 with missionaries in New Zealand from the Macarthur gardens in Australia. They cultivated the gardens and souls unarmed and unprotected amongst the Maori cannibals.

# Camellias in America

- *C. sinensis* was imported as processed tea as early as 1650 by the Dutch. Seeds were first sent to Savannah, GA, in 1744, but failed to grow. In 1772 plants were said to be growing but resulted in a failed business venture. British taxes on processed tea resulted in the Boston Tea Party, a prelude to the 1776 American Revolution and independence.
- A single red *C. japonica* entered the US from England in New Jersey in 1797 or 1798, followed by an *Alba Plena*. Growers developed new varieties from seeds and seedlings from China through England, developing cultivars suitable to popular American taste and cultivation considerations.
- Philadelphia and Boston greenhouse growers by 1840 were producing more than any other cities in the US, sending plants to Europe as well as southern gardens. Southern US gardens in Charleston, Savannah, Wilmington, Mobile, New Orleans, and Mississippi were planted.
- Camellia popularity spread west to Sacramento in 1852, and then up the coast to Washington and Oregon.

# Camellia Shows

184th annual Camellia Exhibition was held in 2013 by the Massachusetts Camellia Society. The show is one of the oldest flower shows in the country - they still fight with Philadelphia over which one is actually the oldest.



# The Masters

- Augusta National Golf Course in Georgia, of Masters fame, is located on the site of Fruitland Nursery, purveyor of camellias 1857-1910. The 10<sup>th</sup> hole is named Camellia, and they are used extensively in course landscaping.



# Wars and Revolutions

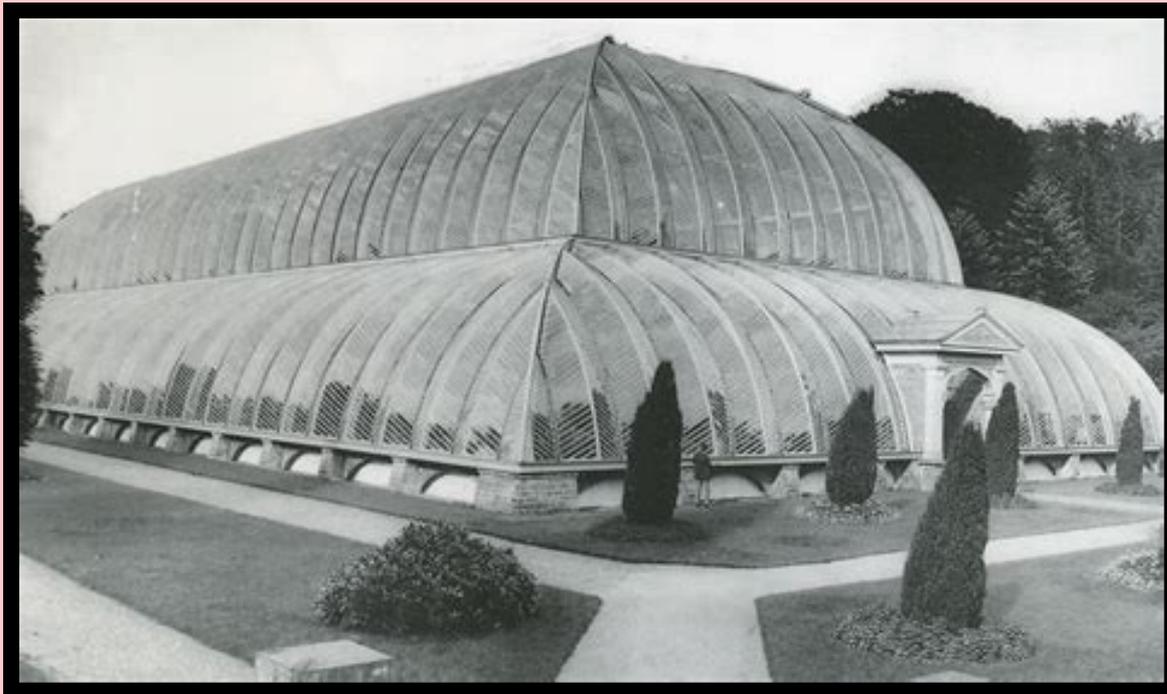
- Charles II of England placed spies in coffee houses, suspecting political talk and sedition. In 1675 he closed them and banned any sale of coffee, leading to popularity of tea and resulting tax on sales, the 1773 Boston Tea Party, and American independence.
- *C. sinensis* was a rare and valuable commodity, locked in silver tea caddies or handsome wooden chests. Afternoon tea was an opportunity to display elaborate trappings of wealth and display of manners. Remember Downton Abbey?
- At the same time, the industrial revolution was creating work opportunities away from service at palatial estates. WWI efforts removed manpower and resources, the 1918 Spanish flu swept the world, women won the vote, and the extravagance and formality of the Victorian era faded. Untended gardens languished, and camellias faded from popularity until 1930s.
- WWII war effort and recovery repeated the challenges of everyday life, but postwar rebuilding created industrial progress, labor-saving gardening, home ownership, and education. Camellia popularity returned and continues.

# Victoriana and Beyond

- *C. japonicas* and *sasanquas* captivated Victorian England and Europe. Lavishly illustrated books were published, specialist nurseries created new cultivars named for royalty, personal conservatories housed collections tended by gardeners. Less exalted owners saved up for one or two plants in modest glasshouses and homes. In milder climates, camellias were ideally suited for popular formal garden designs.
- Symmetry and pure colors epitomized Victorian ideals of floral beauty. Camellias were, of course, of ancient heritage and pure lineage, and therefore more aristocratic than the mongrel rose.

# Chatsworth Glasshouse

- The Duke of Devonshire built his glasshouse in 1840 at Chatsworth House in Derbyshire to house his *Captain Rawes reticulata* and an *Alba Plena*. Both are still healthy and blooming. The 275 foot expanse was wide enough for 2 carriages to pass, and it enclosed plants as well as ponds, viewing galleries, 8 underground boilers consuming 300 tons of coal per year, and 7 miles of hot water pipes. The structure, however, was demolished after WWI due to extreme heating and maintenance costs. Most plants died.



# The Language of Flowers

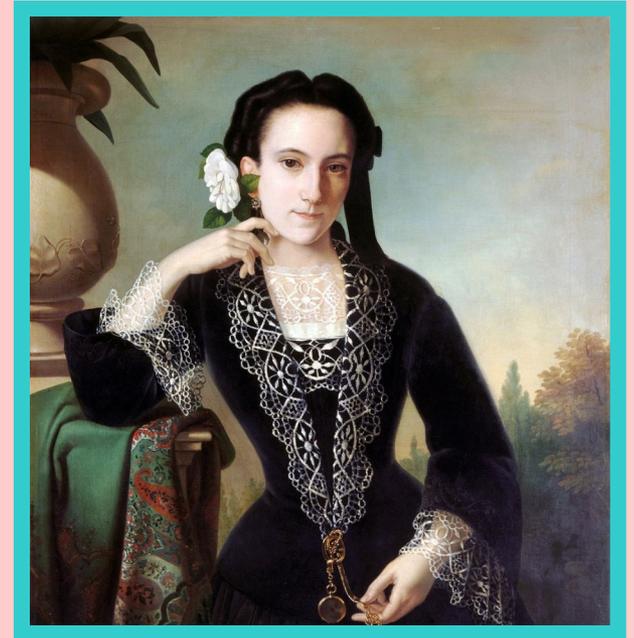
- Blossoms appeared in all visual arts – painted, embroidered, woven, waxed, carved, filmed, and wallpapered. No garden or home was complete without camellias, until the eve of WWI.
- Corsages and boutonnieres were expensive and coveted accessories.

Giving a camellia to another tells them that they are the “flame in your heart.” In *Now, Voyager*, Bette Davis as spinster Margaret Vale wears a corsage of camellias from her married lover who calls her Camille.



# Two Victorian Ladies

1855 *Lady with a Camellia*, by Tominz.  
In the Victorian language of flowers,  
the camellia implied flawless  
beauty. Was she just lovely or available  
as well?



1880 Suffragette in New Zealand has cut  
her hair, steeled her jaw and gaze, and  
identified herself as a supporter of  
women's rights with the white camellia.  
Probably not available.

# Victorian Camellias

5 foot wool rug medallion



11 inch embroidered silk purse



# Current Camellia Events

- Ever looking for profitable ventures, the Dutch are still trying to make a guilder on *C. sinensis*. In 2016, a Dutch based nursery developed an attractive winter hardy plant that can be grown at home.



# Fashion Statements



Barbie, wearing a camellia in her hair,  
is available and all dressed up  
with no place to go without her mask.  
And business hours end at 10 p.m.



# C. Japonica

Formal Double in Diamonds, Sapphires, and Platinum

\$75,000.00 with free shipping



# Resources

- **In no particular order:**
- David Feathers and Milton Brown, *The Camellia: Its History, Culture, Genetics, and a Look Into Its Future Development*
- Jennifer Trehane, *Camellias: The Complete Guide to their Cultivation and Use*
- H. Harold Hume, *Camellias: Kinds and Culture*
- Elizabeth Cooper, *The Camellia – A Condensed History*
- David Bennett, Carmen Maglio, and Shaun Martin: *America's First Camellias*
- Stirling Macoboy: *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Camellias*