

Camellias, Chinese New Year, Samurai Warriors, and the Arnold Arboretum

Ever since Charles Sprague Sargent visited Japan in 1892, the Arnold Arboretum has had a deep interest in plants from the Far East, primarily because the flora of northeastern Asia is strikingly like that of northeastern North America. Over the years, several members of the Arboretum's staff have written in passing on camellias, even though camellias are not hardy in Jamaica Plain. Three excerpts from those writings follow.

Charles Sprague Sargent on *Camellia* in Japan

In 1892, Charles Sprague Sargent, first director of the Arnold Arboretum, collected plants for ten weeks in Japan. He wrote several articles on his travels for *Garden and Forest*, the magazine he had founded in 1888. Later, the accounts were combined and published in book form as *Forest Flora of Japan*. Sargent discussed *Camellia* as follows:

In southern Japan the *Camellia* is a common forest-plant from the sea-level to an altitude of 2,500 feet, on the east coast growing as far north as latitude thirty-six, and nearly two degrees farther on the west coast. Here it is a dwarf bush only two or three feet high, although where the soil and climate favor it, the *Camellia* becomes a tree thirty or forty feet tall, with a handsome straight trunk a foot in diameter, covered with smooth pale bark hardly distinguishable from that of the Beech. In its wild state the flower of the *Camellia* is red, and does not fully expand, the corolla retaining the shape of a cup until it falls. In Japan, certainly less attention has been paid to the improvement of the *Camellia* than in Europe and

America, although double-flowered varieties are known; and as an ornamental plant it does not appear to be particularly popular with the Japanese; it is sometimes planted, however, in temple and city gardens, especially in Tōkyō, where it is not an uncommon plant, and where beautiful old specimens are to be seen.

Tsubaki, by which name *Camellia japonica* is known in Japan, is more valued for the oil which is pressed from its seeds than for the beauty of its flowers. This oil, which the other species of *Camellia* also produce, is used by the women in dressing their hair, and is an article of much commercial importance. The wood of *Camellia* is close-grained, moderately hard, and light-colored, turning pink with exposure; it is cut into combs, although less valued for this purpose than boxwood, and is manufactured into numerous small articles of domestic use. *Sasan-kuwa*, *Camellia sasanqua*, a small bushy tree of southern Japan and China, is perhaps more commonly encountered in Japanese gardens than the *Tsubaki*, and in the first week of November it was just beginning to open its delicate pink flowers in the gardens of Nikkō, although the night temperature was nearly down to the freezing point.

—Excerpted from *Forest Flora of Japan: Notes on the Forest Flora of Japan*, by Charles Sprague Sargent (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1894), page 17.

Ernest H. Wilson on the Introduction of Camellias to the West

E. H. Wilson, who was affiliated with the Arnold Arboretum from 1906 until his death in 1930, made six collecting trips to the Orient between 1899 and 1919. He writes as follows on the introduction of camellias to the West:

Known to the Japanese as *Tsubakki*, the *Camellia* was long ago christened the Japan Rose, a very

Opposite: A Specimen of *Camellia japonica* Growing in Ongata village, Honshu, Japan. Thirty-five feet tall and with a trunk three feet in girth at its base, this specimen has attained true tree form. Photographed in April 1914 by Ernest H. Wilson. Photograph from the Archives of the Arnold Arboretum.

appropriate name. It attracted the attention of the earliest foreign visitors to Japan, and Kaempfer wrote about it and pictured it in his book published in 1712. Just when or by what means it was conveyed to Europe we do not know, but it is on record that it was cultivated in England before 1739 by Lord Petre. Very probably it went first from Japan carried by Dutch traders to Batavia, thence to Holland in the same manner as the Camphor-tree, Chrysanthemum, *Azalea indica*, and a number of other plants. Be that as it may, it was grown in many of the best gardens of Europe toward the close of the 18th Century. It is figured in that wonderful old publication, *The Botanical Magazine*, in its second volume, plate 42 (1788), and the flower pictured is exactly that of the wild species.

It would appear, therefore, that up to that date little or no improvement in the Camellia had taken place. Considering what happened within the next few years, this may at first seem strange, but

the explanation is simple. In Japan the *Tsubakki* was regarded with superstitious awe by the warrior or Samurai class. The color of the flower is red, and it has a bad habit of falling off at the neck almost as soon as its petals are expanded. The color suggested blood to the Samurai and the fallen flower a human head severed from the body, and so to those who lived by the sword the *Tsubakki* symbolized their probable fate by decapitation. One sees the plant in Japanese gardens today and one or two distinct varieties are grown, but the Japanese really favor another species (*C. sasanqua*). . . . On the other hand, the Chinese appear to have no superstitious dread of this plant. It was cultivated in China's nurseries, temple grounds, and gardens of the wealthy. Evidently quite a number of varieties were grown in Chinese gardens, for we find the old East India ships plying between Canton and England carrying Camellia plants back to their friends and patrons. Through this means eleven well-marked varieties were in cultivation in England in 1812; by 1819 the number had so increased and the plant established itself so firmly in popular estimation that Samuel Curtis published a special monograph, elephant folio size, with eight pages of text, enumerating twenty-one varieties and illustrated by five beautifully colored plates, one of which is reproduced here. The artist, Miss Clara M. Pope, evidently possessed great ability, for her drawings are admirably done and the coloring is remarkably good. This monograph is interesting as being about the only one of this size devoted to a single genus of flowering trees. As different varieties blossomed they were figured in the current magazines, which helped increase their popularity.

Early in the 19th Century nurserymen began the raising of Camellias from seeds. Later the intercrossing of varieties was diligently and successfully carried out and many hundreds of sorts resulted. As the Victorian age approached its optimum the breeders of Camellias lost sight of everything else but the regularity of the blossom and, moreover, kept the plants trimmed into ovoid masses, which in the end brought about a revolution. The old-fashioned varieties of Camellia, like 'Alba Plena', 'Lady Hume's Blush', prim, stiff, and solid, not inappropriately typify the period; indeed, this type of Camellia might well be its floral emblem. The single varieties with their cupped blossoms, their abundant yellow-anthered stamens, and the semi-double forms had passed out of fashion in favor of the severely double, regular shaped blossom types.



Camellia japonica as depicted in Curtis's *Botanical Magazine* in 1788.

One of the earliest introductions from China was known as the Warratah or Anemone Flower, and very beautiful it was with its mass of stamens partially converted into narrow petals. This was the forerunner of many similar varieties, and this class together with the single-flowered forms is coming back into fashion.

—Excerpted from *House & Garden*, Volume 57, Number 3 (March 1930).

Camellias and the Chinese New Year

Chinese New Year falls on February 9th in 1986. The camellia, like many other plants, was traditionally used in China to decorate homes, shops, boats, etc., during the New Year celebration. Franklin P. Metcalf, a research associate, writing in the February 13, 1942, issue of *Arnoldia*, described the use of camellias in Canton, China, nearly half a century ago. This year, New Englanders can view camellias in flower during February at the Lyman Estate in Waltham, Massachusetts, and at the Massachusetts Camellia Society's annual meeting in Jamaica Plain. For details, see the "New England Horticultural Calendar" published in this issue of *Arnoldia*.

Metcalf wrote as follows in 1942:

One of the most interesting customs in Canton, China, is that connected with the Chinese New Year, a variable date which may occur, according to the foreign calendar, some time during the month of January or February. On the Chinese New Year, every Chinese family in Canton feels the necessity of having in its home some flowers appropriate to the New Year season. All shops are likewise decorated. Every sampan, the home of the boat people, has its splash of color and so does the junk and flower boat. Without this symbol of life, and without the decorations of scarlet-red paper, the spirit of the New Year season seems lacking.

Camellia (*Camellia japonica* Linnaeus [*Thea japonica* (L.) Nois.]), *shan ch'a* in Chinese, a shrub with beautiful dark green, shining foliage and usually delicate pink flowers, is seen in the mar-

ket either as shapely shrubby bushes, beautifully cultivated in attractive flower pots, or as cut branches. Red and white forms are not often seen during the holiday season. The larger shrubs are expensive.

This flower, as mentioned above, is extensively used as a floral offering to the temple gods when special requests for the New Year are presented. It may be mentioned also in passing that this flower is never worn as an ornament in a lady's hair, for the large buds of the Camellia take a whole year to open. To the Chinese this would symbolize the fact that a woman would have to wait one whole year for a son—much too long a period—and so the Camellia is not used by women as a floral decoration.

—Excerpted from *Arnoldia*, Volume 2, Number 1 (February 13, 1942).



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