



Heirloom Camellias for Tallahassee Gardens

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Camellias are an integral part of the Tallahassee landscape. They beautify our yards with flowers from autumn to spring, and add background greenery all year long. But have you ever really thought about where camellias come from? They have quite a long history in America, and in the South in particular.

The most common camellia in our area is *Camellia japonica*. Its name gives a hint of where it comes from, China and Japan. A related species, *Camellia sinensis*, is the source of common black or green tea. The Chinese and Japanese have grown both species for a long-time, *C. sinensis* agriculturally and *C. japonica* in gardens as an ornamental.

It was the Europeans' love for tea that originally brought their attention to the camellia. In the middle of the eighteenth century, the East India Company introduced a large number of camellia plants to Europe in hopes of starting a tea industry of their own. Many of the seedlings they planted turned out to be ornamental varieties. The wonderful, glossy foliage and delicate flowers soon became quite popular on the Continent and in England.

It was not long before gardeners in America began to acquire camellias for themselves.

Charleston, South Carolina, was one of the early cities in the United States to import camellias. The warm climate and busy port made it perfect for growing and selling. Magnolia Gardens, owned by the Rev. John Drayton, was responsible for developing a large number of new varieties.

By the late nineteenth century, there were over three hundred varieties growing there.

Some of the camellia varieties growing in the eighteenth and nineteenth century are still popular in the nursery trade today. 'Alba Plena' is one of the oldest varieties. It is a white, slow-growing bush that flowers in the early part of the season. This variety was first brought to England in 1792 by a Captain Conner of the East India Company and later made its way to the United States. It is still readily available in the nursery trade.

Another heirloom variety is 'Gigantea'. It was imported from Europe to Magnolia Gardens in the 1840's. It features very large flowers of red marbled with white and blooms midseason. The blooms are semi-double peony shape.

'Pink Perfection' is a common variety in Tallahassee. It has also been in the United States over one hundred years. Originating in Japan, this variety was imported to the Sacramento, California

area in 1875. Its shell pink, double flowers bloom early to mid-season and the plant itself is vigorous and long-lived.

‘Aunt Jetty’ is a famous historic camellia, introduced into the country around the beginning of the twentieth century. Perhaps the original specimen of this variety can be seen at Maclay Gardens State Park in Tallahassee. It was purchased by Alfred Maclay in the early 1920’s as a mature plant and moved to its present site in the Gardens by mule-pulled wagon. ‘Aunt Jetty’ has an oriental red flower that is sometimes splotted by white. It has a semi-double loose peony form of flower.

Another camellia everyone is probably familiar with is ‘Professor C. S. Sargent’. It was introduced in 1925 through Magnolia Gardens. It has a dark red full peony shaped flower that blooms mid-season. The bush itself is vigorous and can withstand direct sun.

If you would like to try any of these camellias in your yard, now is a great time to pick out the ones you like. Visit Maclay Gardens or any local nurseries now through early spring to see what the different flower shapes and colors look like. If you do decide to plant one in your home landscape, remember to provide it with well-drained soil and a little bit of shade. The open shade under high pine trees is ideal. Water well during dry periods and fertilize lightly four times a year: before spring growth begins, after the first flush of growth, midsummer, and early winter after settled cool temperatures have arrived. Water plants well before and after fertilizer application. With a little luck, you will have an heirloom plant yourself.

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