Camellia japonica

Camellia japonica, known as common camellia or Japanese camellia, is one of the best known species of the genus *Camellia*. Sometimes called the Rose of winter, it belongs to the *Theaceae* family. It is the official state flower of Alabama. There are thousands of cultivars of *C. japonica* in cultivation, with many different colors and forms of flowers.

In the wild, it is found in mainland China (Shandong, east Zhejiang), Taiwan, southern Korea and southern Japan. It grows in forests, at altitudes of around 300–1,100 metres (980–3,610 ft).

Description

Camellia japonica is a flowering tree or shrub, usually 1.5–6 metres (4.9–19.7 ft) tall, but occasionally up to 11 metres (36 ft) tall. Some cultivated varieties achieve a size of 72m² or more. The alternately arranged leathery leaves are dark green on the top side, paler on the underside, with a stalk (petiole) about 5–10 millimetres (0.2–0.4 in) long. The base of the leaf is pointed (cuneate), the margins are very finely toothed (serrulate) and the tip somewhat pointed.

In the wild, flowering is between January and March. The flowers appear along the branches, particularly towards the ends, and have very short stems. They occur either alone or in pairs. There are about nine greenish bracteoles and sepals. Flowers of the wild species have six or seven rose or white petals, Cultivated forms often have more petals.

The fruit consists of a globe-shaped capsule with three compartments (locules), each with one or two large brown seeds. Fruiting occurs in September to October in the wild.

Taxonomy

The genus *Camellia* was named after a Jesuit priest and botanist named Georg Kamel. The specific epithet *japonica* was given to the species by Carl Linnaeus in 1753 because Engelbert Kaempfer was the first to give a description of the plant while in Japan.

Two varieties are distinguished in the *Flora of China*: *C. japonica* var. *japonica* and *C. japonica* var. *rusticana.*

Camellia japonica var. japonica

C. japonica var. *japonica* is the form named by Linnaeus, and naturally occurs in forests at altitudes of 300–1,100 metres (980–3,610 ft) in Shandong, eastern Zhejiang in mainland China and in Taiwan, south Japan, and South Korea. The leaf has a glabrous stem (petiole) about 1 centimetre (0.4 in) long. The bracteoles and sepals are velvety (velutinous). It flowers between January–March, and fruits in September–October. It is grown as a garden plant in the form of many cultivars throughout the world.

Camellia japonica var. rusticana

Camellia japonica var. *rusticana* (Honda) T. L. Ming naturally occurs in forests in Zhejiang (island of Zhoushan Qundao) in mainland China and in Honshu, Japan. The leaf has a shorter petiole, about 5 millimetres (0.2 in) long, with fine hairs (pubescent) at the base. The color of the flowers ranges from red through rose to pink, flowering in April to May.

In Japan it is known by the common name "yuki-tsubaki" (snow camellia) as it naturally occurs in areas of heavy snowfall at altitudes ranging from 3,500 ft down to 400 ft on sloping land under deciduous beech trees in the mountain regions to the north of the main island of Honshu and facing the Sea of Japan.

History

China

Camellia japonica has appeared in paintings and porcelain in China since the 11th century. Early paintings of the plant are usually of the single red flowering type. However, a single white flowering plant is shown in the scroll of the *Four Magpies* of the Song Dynasty.

Australia

The first records of camellias in Australia pertain to a consignment to Alexander Macleay of Sydney that arrived in 1826 and were planted in Sydney at Elizabeth Bay House.

By 1883, Shepherd and Company, the leading nurserymen in Australia at the time, listed 160 varieties of *Camellia japonica*.

Europe

According to a research conducted in 1959, by Dr. Frederick Meyer, of the United States Department of Agriculture, the camellias of Campo Bello (Portugal) are the oldest known specimens in Europe, which would have been planted around 1550, that is to say, these trees are nowadays approximately 460 years old. However it is said that the camellia was first brought to the West in 1692 by Engelbert Kaempfer, Chief Surgeon to the Dutch East India Company. He brought details of over 30 varieties back from Asia Camellias were introduced into Europe during the 18th century and had already been cultivated in the Orient for thousands of years. Robert James of Essex, England, is thought to have brought back the first live camellia to England in 1739. On his return from Dejima, Carl Peter Thunberg made a short trip to London where he made the acquaintance of Sir Joseph Banks. Thunberg donated to Kew Botanic Gardens four specimens of *Camellia japonica*. One of these was supposedly given in 1780 to the botanical garden of Pillnitz

Castle near Dresden in Germany where it currently measures 8.9 metres (29 feet) in height and 11 metres (36 feet) in diameter.

The oldest trees of *Camellia japonica* in Europe can be found in Campobello (Portugal), Caserta (Italy) and Pillnitz (Germany). These were probably planted at the end of the 16th century.

United States

In the U.S.A., camellias were first sold in 1807 as greenhouse plants, but were soon distributed to be grown outdoors in the south.

In Charleston, South Carolina, the estate garden of Magnolia-on-the-Ashley introduced hundreds of new *Camellia japonica* cultivars from the 19th century onwards, and its recently restored collection has been designated an International Camellia Garden of Excellence. "Debutante", a popular variety, was originally introduced by Magnolia as "Sarah C. Hastie". The name was changed to give it more marketing appeal.

Cross-breeding of camellias has produced many cultivars which are tolerant of hardiness zone 6 winters. These camellia varieties can grow in the milder parts of the lower Midwest (St. Louis, for example), Pacific Northwest, NYC area (NYC/NJ/CT), and even Ontario, Canada (near edge of the Great Lakes).

Cultivars

Camellia japonica is valued for its flowers, which can be single, semi-double or double flowered. There are more than 2,000 cultivars developed from *C. japonica*. The shade of the flowers can vary from red to pink to white; they sometimes have multi-coloured stripes or specks.

Flower form or style

Camellia flower forms are quite varied but the main types are single, semi-double, formal double, informal double and elegans (or anemone) form.

Single

Single flowers have five to a maximum of eight petals in one row, petals loose, regular or irregular. May include petaloids; prominent display of stamens & pistils.

Semi-Double

Two or more rows of large regular, irregular or loose outer petals (nine or more) with an uninterrupted cluster of stamens. May include petaloids; petals may overlap or be set in rows for 'hose in hose' effect.

Irregular Semi-Double

A semi-double with one or more petaloids interrupting the cluster of stamens.

Formal Double

Many rows and number of petals (sometimes more than a hundred), regularly disposed, tiered or imbricated, but no visible stamens. Usually with a central cone of tightly furled petals.

Elegans Form

One or more rows of large outer petals lying flat or undulating, with a mass of intermingled petaloids and stamens in the center. Previously called "Anemone Form".

Informal Double

A mass of raised petals with petaloids (parts of the flower that have assumed the appearance of small, narrow or twisted petals). Stamens may or may not be visible. Previously called "Peony Form".

Cultivation

Camellias should be planted in the shade in organic, somewhat acidic, semi-moist but well drained soil. If the soil is not well drained, it can cause the roots to rot.

As a *Camellia* species, *C. japonica* can be used to make tea. Its processed leaves show aromatic fragrance. It contains caffeine and catechins of the same kind as *C. sinensis*.

Diseases

Some fungal and algal diseases include: Spot Disease, which gives the upper side of leaves a silver color and round spots, and can cause loss of leaves; Black Mold; Leaf Spot; Leaf Gall; Flower Blight, which causes flowers to become brown and fall; Root Rot; and Canker caused by the fungus *Glomerella cingulata*, which penetrates plants through wounds. Some insects and pests of *C. japonica* are the Fuller Rose Beetle *Pantomorus cervinus*, the mealybugs *Planococcus citri* and *Pseudococcus longispinus*, the weevils *Otiorhyncus salcatus* and *Otiorhyncus ovatus*, and the tea scale *Fiorinia theae*.

Some physiological diseases include salt injury which results from high levels of salt in soil; chlorosis which is thought to be caused lack of certain elements in the soil or insufficient acidity preventing their absorption by the roots; bud drop which causes loss or decay of buds, and can be caused by over-watering, high temperatures, or pot-bound roots. Other diseases are oedema and sunburn. Not much is known about viral diseases in *C. japonica*.

In culture and art

Camellias are seen as lucky symbols for the Chinese New Year and spring and were even used as offerings to the gods during the Chinese New Year. It is also thought that Chinese women would never wear a Camellia in their hair because it opened much later after the bud formed. This was thought to signify that she would not have a son for a long time.

One of the most important plants related to *Camellia japonica* is the *Camellia sinensis*, which is the plant tea comes from. This plant is not usually grown in gardens because it has small white flowers, unlike the *Camellia japonica*, which has larger, more beautiful flowers. It is not seen in art as often as the *Camellia japonica*, but it is shown in a painting called the *Song Hundred Flowers* which hangs in the Palace Museum in Beijing. *Camellia sinensis* may have been used as medicine during the Shang Dynasty. It was first used for drinking during the Zhou Dynasty.