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The Exquisite Camellia

By C. C. HILLARY

Of all the shrubs grown in the gardens of Western Australia today, I doubt if there is one with greater beauty than the camellia. Exquisite when in bloom, the plants still excite admiration by the beauty of their highly-polished, almost mirror-like, dark-green foliage when the flowers are absent.

And how lovely indeed are the flowers! Some, so perfect in form that they hardly seem real; others with charming ruffled centres after the style of peonies and others, again, with petals so tightly packed that they remind one of the New South Wales waratah. Indeed, there is one fine variety named Red Waratah, which is widely grown throughout Australia.

A LONG-LIVED PLANT.

Camellias live for a very long time—just how long no-one seems to know for certain. The oldest camellias growing in this State were thriving when the Franco-Prussian war was being fought. They have long outlived the pioneers who brought them from England, planted them, and gave them the loving care they needed in their new environment.

That was more than 90 years ago and still these lovely shrubs, one might almost call them trees now, go on flowering, year after year, for the pleasure of all who enjoy the company of noble plants. These particular camellias are growing in rich, alluvial soil in an old-fashioned garden established by Captain Theodore Fawcett of the 6th Dragoon Guards on the banks of the Murray River, Pinjarra, way back in 1862.

The tallest of them must be over 30ft. high. It is the lovely old-fashioned variety named Lowell, a formal type with pink flowers flecked with white. Another is Lady Hume's Blush, which has nicely formed blooms in the palest shade of pink. Yet another has been identified as Valte-vareda, a charming formal camellia in a medium shade of pink.

In other gardens, too, there are camellias of 50 and more years of age. One of them lives in an old garden in the hills near Karragullen. It is a fine specimen of Great Eastern, that lovely deep red camellia with a white blotch which is sometimes known as Emperor variegata.

I have mentioned the long life of the camellia, so that those who buy and plant them will choose their positions carefully, realising that they are planting as much for posterity as for themselves.
KEEP THE ROOTS COOL.

One great thing in favour of camellias is that they are easy plants to grow. In some towns in Spain they are even used as small street trees. With their roots below the flags where the soil is always moist and cool, they thrive quite well despite their exposure to maximum quantities of sunshine.

Camellias certainly have likes and dislikes, but who hasn’t? They like an acid type of soil; they dislike lime in any form. They (or most of them) prefer a certain amount of shade in the afternoon to full sunshine all day. They also like a cool, moist root run and dislike hot, dry soil around their roots. That sums up their likes and dislikes—not many really, are there?

The most suitable soil for camellias is a nice friable loam, but they grow quite well in gravelly ground and in sand, provided the sites chosen for the shrubs are well enriched with old animal manure or well-decayed vegetable matter. Whatever the ground, however, it should be dug and enriched to a depth of 18in., since the plants root deeply when the soil conditions are favourable.

FEEDING THE PLANTS.

It is most important that lime in any form should not be used. Wood ashes are also unsuitable since they contain a proportion of lime. Camellias thrive best in acid soils with a pH value of from 4.5 to 5.5. Soils with a higher pH value should be dressed with aluminium sulphate. If applied two or three months before planting, a tablespoonful to the square yard may be used. When applied after planting, the quantity should not exceed a dessertspoonful to the square yard and this amount may be applied twice a year if considered necessary. The acidity of the soil can be maintained by the use of decayed lawn clippings and other grasses.

Camellias like nitrogen and other foods just as much as other plants, though years ago we were advised to the contrary. Once they are established in the garden, they may be fed two or three times a year with blood and bone or fowl manure. They thrive well on both.

When blood and bone is used, two, three, or four handfuls should be scattered around each bush according to size. It should not be dug into the soil, but very lightly scratched into the surface with a small fork or rake. When fowl or pigeon manure is used, it should be placed around the plants in the form of a mulch one inch thick. It must not be dug into the soil, but left on the surface, then every time the plants are watered, some of the nourishment in the manure will be washed down to the roots. When placing fowl manure around a camellia, always keep it 6in. away from the main stem.

While some varieties of camellias will grow in full sunshine, in this climate most of them thrive better when provided with a certain amount of shade from the hot, afternoon sun in summer. Even those that grow in full sunshine usually lose much of their fine appearance towards the end of summer, the foliage, instead of remaining a rich green, assuming an unattractive yellowish colour. The young flower buds, too, are often scorched when subjected to too much heat.

When choosing the position for a camellia, the question of height should also be considered. Many plants will grow to 10ft. within eight or nine years when both the site and soil are favourable.

Of even more importance, perhaps, than soil and position is water. Camellias simply will not thrive in dry soil. They must have a cool root run and plenty of moisture around the roots at all times. A cool root run can be assured by placing a thick mulch of some kind around the plants in summer. Those living in hot, dry areas, where water is limited, can still enjoy the beauty of camellias by growing them in pots and tins in bush houses or on sheltered verandahs.

The variation that often occurs in the flowering of camellias is really most fascinating. There are plants which produce flowers of one colour on one side of the bush and blooms of another colour on the other. Sometimes a pure white variety, such as Purity—one of the loveliest formal camellias in existence, will have petals with pink blushes. Others, again, produce large flowers on one side of the bush and smaller flowers on the other. Further
variations occur, sometimes they become permanent, and on other occasions they are seen once or twice and then disappear.

Many varieties throw sports of a different colour and sometimes of different shape. There is evidence that plants of the same variety, growing in widely separated countries, have thrown precisely similar sports at about the same time. This has caused confusion in nomenclature, because the sports in each country were given a different name.

Interested bodies in Great Britain, the United States, Australia and New Zealand are now endeavouring to clear away this confusion and put the naming on a basis which will eliminate all surplus and unnecessary titles.

I hesitate to suggest varieties as I think all camellias are beautiful. Perhaps the best way to start a collection is to buy the plants when they are in bloom. You will then be sure of getting the kinds that please you most.

A few varieties I would recommend to everyone however are: The Czar, a Victorian raised camellia in rich scarlet with delightful golden stamens, the flowers are semi-double and very beautiful. Emperor variegata or Great Eastern, a very large, double red, with a white blotch and a magnificent flower in every way; Edward Billing (this is the New Zealand name which has been adopted here, elsewhere it has other names) a very full, informal pink and a very lovely camellia indeed. Purity, a white camellia so perfectly formed that it almost holds one spellbound. Red Waratah, a fine double red with a paeony-shaped centre; and Optimus, a really lovely pink variety, heavily striped with deeper rose.
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