The Story of Plants: CAMELLIA

Daniel Mount

As I wandered the aisles of a 99¢ store last week looking for something to satisfy my sweet tooth, my eyes were drawn to a little pink coin purse. It was richly decorated with flowers I think were meant to be camellias. Camellias are a typical gift at Chinese New Year, bringing good fortune and wealth.

Camellia sinensis

One species of the genus *Camellia* brought great wealth to China: *C. sinensis*, the tea plant. It was already being harvested 4,700 years ago in the wilds of southwestern China, 2,000 years before it was ever farmed. Early Taoist monks valued the drink made from the leaves as a means to purify the mind. In Yunnan, where ancient native groves are still harvested, there is one believed to be nearly 2,800 years old. By the 1500s the legend of this miraculous drink had spread around the world to Europe. The first English tea clippers arrived in China 100 years later. The tea trade between England and China reshaped the world fostering wars and treaties and a few tea parties. Many of our favorite garden plants reached the gardeners of England packed among the tea chests, bolts of silk, and crates of porcelain. Among these plants headed toward the burgeoning economic power on the British Isles were the ornamental camellias (*C. japonica* cvs.).

This highly variable native to Japan, Korea, and eastern China is estimated at having over 40,000 cultivars. In China at the Taoist temple Tai Qing Gong, a 700 year old specimen of 'Jiangxue' still flourishes, surely a testament to a long history of reverence and cultivation in the East.

The China rose, as *C. japonica* cultivars were known when they arrived in the U.S. in 1797, were grown exclusively in greenhouses for the floral trade. No well-appointed Bostonian would be without a camellia in his lapel hole, a sign of his wealth. The fashion for camellias boomed for many decades before collapsing at the start of the Civil War. Yet horticulturists did not lose interest in the glossy leaves and showy flowers of camellias. They moved from glasshouses to gardens and the quest for ever showier flowers caught fire with the popularity of camellias rising and falling like the stock exchange.

Living just outside the Camellia Belt, which runs along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts and up the West Coast, I've had dissatisfying results with camellias at home. Only 16 miles separate the 30-foot-tall camellias in my clients' gardens with my Carnation home and, unfortunately, I've lost many of my camellias. A 20-year-old *C. japonica* succumbed to heavy snow and prolonged freezing two years ago. All of my attempts at growing *C. sasanqua* cultivars have failed. My *C. sinensis* 'Sochi', a tea cultivar originating from southern Russia, is said to be hardy to 0° F. Cowardly, I whisk it into the house any time the temperature drops into the 20s.

Since the 1950s, camellia hybridizers have shifted their ideals from showiness toward fragrance and hardiness. Mixing the cold hardy genes of the oil camellia (*C. oleifera*) with those of sasanquas they are expanding the Camellia Belt northward and inland. With names like 'Snow Flurry' and 'Fire 'n Ice' I'm tempted to buy a few and try again. Or, maybe I could take the free advice of the tea drinking Taoist Lao Tzu who said, "If you know how to be satisfied you are rich."

Since it's winter, my 'Sochi' is riding out a cold spell on my desk. The single flowers like snowflakes among the dark leaves are sweetly scented and satisfying. So I guess I'm not fooling myself when I say I'm rich.

Daniel Mount is an NHS board member. Read more of Daniel's thoughts on plants and gardening on his blog www.danielmountgardens.blogspot.com.