

The Secret Life of Camellias

Everyone is familiar with the Grande Dames of the southern garden, the Camellias. These showy beauties, with their glossy evergreen foliage, and stunning array of blossoms, have earned a well deserved place in our landscapes. We marvel at their multiple forms, from simple singles, to complex peony and anemones, to massive double-roses, and we delight in the camellias color range, from purest white to darkest crimson, with every shade and combination in between. Add in the fact that camellias bloom in deepest winter, when most of our landscape plants are, to be kind, not at their best, and it's easy to understand why these Belles are held in such high esteem by southern gardeners.



High Fragrance Camellia

Camellias are easy to grow, requiring somewhat acidic soil, and preferring dappled shade, although they can handle more sun with acclimatization. Use peat as a soil amendment at planting, and use a fertilizer formulated for acid-lovers. Pest and disease issues are few, although white-flies can sometimes be a problem. Being evergreen, they can form the strong backdrop for seasonal color.

But despite the showy, "look-at-me!" persona, camellias harbor some secrets, and perhaps even a dark past. One such secret is that camellias can be fragrant. Who knew? Although most popular cultivars are strictly eye-candy, some, such as "Fragrant Pink", "High Fragrance" and "Scentsation" bring the added dimension of scent to the garden.

And about that dark past? Would you believe that camellias are responsible for invasions, revolutions, wars and conquests, not to mention piracy, smuggling, an arms race in the development of sailing ships, and aggravated tax-evasion? All true, because one camellia, *Camellia sinensis*, is the source of the beverage we know as tea.



Pink Tea Camellia blooms

Since its discovery over 5000 years ago in China, the tea camellia has been the root cause of all of these events. The British colonized India, the Dutch took Java, Clipper Ships grew loftier and ever faster, the Boston Patriots started a revolution, (and caffeinated a harbor full of fish) all over tea.

Fortunately, we can enjoy a fresh-brewed cup of home grown tea without all that drama. *Camellia sinensis*, the tea camellia, is well adapted to our area.

While the blooms are not showy, tea camellias enjoy the same conditions as their fancier sisters. And making black tea, the most popular sort, is pretty simple;

- First, collect the topmost 2 to 3 leaves and buds from the ends of each branch.
- Gently roll the leaves between your palms, lightly crushing/bruising them for a few minutes, until the leaves begin to darken. This exposes the tea compounds to the air, allowing oxidation, which develops flavors.
- Spread the bruised leaves on a tray, and leave in a cool location for two or three days, while oxidation takes place.
- Dry the tea, either in a 250-degree oven, or a food dehydrator, until well dried (about 20 minutes).
- Store in an air-tight container and use as you would any loose-leaf tea.