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Camellias reach peak as winter wanes Bright reds, pinks make lovely gifts for Lunar New Year

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Camellias come into their own at this time of year.

With their shiny evergreen leaves and smooth gray-tan trunks (dramatically muscular and sculpted-looking on older specimens), they are handsome enough year-round, but right now they're putting on an impressively varied floral display. The upcoming San Francisco Peninsula Camellia Society's annual show and sale is a timely introduction to these shrubs in all their diversity.

Camellias have some interesting family connections. Tea is a camellia, in the same sense that okra is a hibiscus. The Theaceae is one of those groups -- like magnolias and ginseng -- that are common to East Asia and eastern North America. The lost *Franklinia*, discovered by the Bartrams in 1765 and never seen in the wild again, is a camellia relative, as are the loblolly-bay (*Gordonia*) and the *Stewartias*: all handsome white-flowering American shrubs or small trees with close Chinese kin.

Although camellias became known to the West via Japan, China is their heartland. Botanists recognize up to 250 natural species, not counting all the hybrids and cultivars. Apart from *Camellia japonica* and *C. sasanqua*, most of the horticulturally important species come from the southwestern provinces of Yunnan and Szechuan.

Introducing some of those Chinese camellias to cultivation required some extreme botanizing. Plant hunters, mostly British, working for the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew or for private firms like James Veitch & Sons, scoured the far corners of Asia for desirable plants, braving vertical terrain, icy mountain rivers, endemic disease, and occasional local hostility. George Forrest, the intrepid Scot who discovered *Camellia saluenensis* in Yunnan, once had to run for his life from xenophobic Tibetan monks; Lisu tribespeople helped smuggle him to safety.

It's not clear how *C. japonica* reached the West, though. The great classifier Carl Linnaeus named it for the Jesuit missionary and botanist George Kamel, but Kamel worked in the Philippines and probably never saw his namesake plant. There's an apocryphal story that the first camellias in Europe were palmed off as tea plants by Chinese traders.

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Be that as it may, the German traveler Engelbert Kaempfer, who likely saw them in Japan, wrote about them in 1710, and Robert James, the Eighth Baron Petre, was growing them in his hothouse in Essex as early as 1739. By 1846 -- two years before the younger Alexandre Dumas published "La Dame aux Camellias" -- there were enough European growers to hold the first camellia show, in Luxembourg. Camellias were first grown in California in 1852.

Meanwhile, Japanese growers, organized as the Hana Ren, had been developing the Higo camellia. They were a dedicated and secretive outfit, keeping tight control of plant material. To qualify as a true Higo, the flowers had to have at least 100 stamens; these could be either bunched in a column or, ideally, spread out in a wide ring. Other shape and color criteria also had to be met. Higos are still prized as bonsai specimens.

North American, Australian, and New Zealand breeders soon got into the act, crossing *C. japonica* with *C. sasanqua*, *C. saluenensis*, *C. reticulata* and other species. That's how we got today's 32,000 or so named varieties. But species camellias, like the yellow-flowering *C. chrysantha* and the fragrant *C. lutchuensis*, have their own following.

Woodside resident Marjorie O'Malley developed her share of those cultivars, including one she named for her husband, Charles. She got hooked on camellias in the 1950s while gardening in Southern California, with plants from what was then Nuccio's Camellia and Azalea Nursery (now Nuccio's Nurseries) in Altadena. Julius and Joe Nuccio helped move her camellias to the Bay Area in 1966.

Both O'Malleys were devoted equestrians, and the Nuccio brothers planted a hedge of *C. sasanqua* 'Yuletide' as a horse jump in their riding ring. Tours of O'Malley's garden, whose 300 specimens included cultivars no longer commercially available, were an annual event for the San Francisco Peninsula Camellia Society. Following her death in 2004, her plants were divided between Stanford University and the San Francisco Botanical Garden at Strybing Arboretum.

You can get a taste of what inspired Marjorie O'Malley and other camellia aficionados at the show (see box). The event coincides happily with the Friends of San Francisco Botanical Garden's Lunar New Year plant sale there. Plants not usually available in nurseries will be on sale, and plenty of red varieties suitable for Valentine's Day or Lunar New Year gifts. Society members will be on hand to provide care advice.

The word is in: Professor Arthur Shapiro won his own contest (which happens more often than not) by collecting the first cabbage white butterfly of 2007 on Jan. 23, near the UC Davis campus. The winner's pitcher of beer was shared with Shapiro's graduate students and a visiting colleague.

Camellia shows

San Francisco Peninsula Camellia Society Show and Sale: 10 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Feb. 10; 11 a.m.-3 p.m. Feb.

11. County Fair Building, Golden Gate Park (off Lincoln Way), San Francisco. (650) 728-5600; e-mail camelliasociety@aol.com.

Camellia Treasures: From Tea to Trees: Feb. 27-March 3. Filoli, 86 Cañada Road, Woodside. Camellia tours, pruning and care demonstrations, Japanese tea ceremonies and tea tasting. Reservations: (650) 364-8300, ext. 508; www.filoli.org.

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