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A ROYAL HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY GROUP

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A glimpse of the future:
Notes on some less familiar *Camellia* species in cultivation

CAMELLIA POLYODONTA MAURICE FOSTER

The number of designated species in genus *Camellia* varies markedly depending on which taxonomist you favour. The first comprehensive study was by Robert Sealy at Kew in 1958 and from the material then available, he described 82 species. In 1981, with many more species newly discovered, HT Chang raised the game, recognising no less than 280. Finally, T Ming, in 2000, largely following Sealy, reduced this number sharply to 119 species. There is clearly much work to be done to reach a consensus.

Whichever taxonomic classification you follow, about 80% of species are to be found in China, with many new species being recently discovered in Vietnam and scattered elsewhere through east Asia. China remains the centre of gravity of the genus.

Many Chinese species are found in the warm temperate and sub-tropical zones in the south, southwest and in the coastal provinces, with those inland usually at relatively low altitude. This means that cold hardiness is the principal limiting factor for successful cultivation in the UK. Many new species have been discovered in recent years, most untried in gardens, posing a challenge to discover the cold tolerance boundaries as well as garden merit. Our recent extended run of milder winters in the UK has been helpful in observing and gaining knowledge of a good range, even if we may be living in a fool's weather paradise for the time being with a real old-fashioned winter to come sooner or later. Having said that, there is a belief that some members of the *Theaceae*, such as *Camellia*, and the closely related *Ternstroemia* and *Polyspora*, for example, may have some ancestral cold-hardy genes in their makeup, which allows for a degree of optimism.

The four seminal species in the development of literally thousands of cultivars are of course *Camellia japonica*, *C. sasanqua*, *C. reticulata*

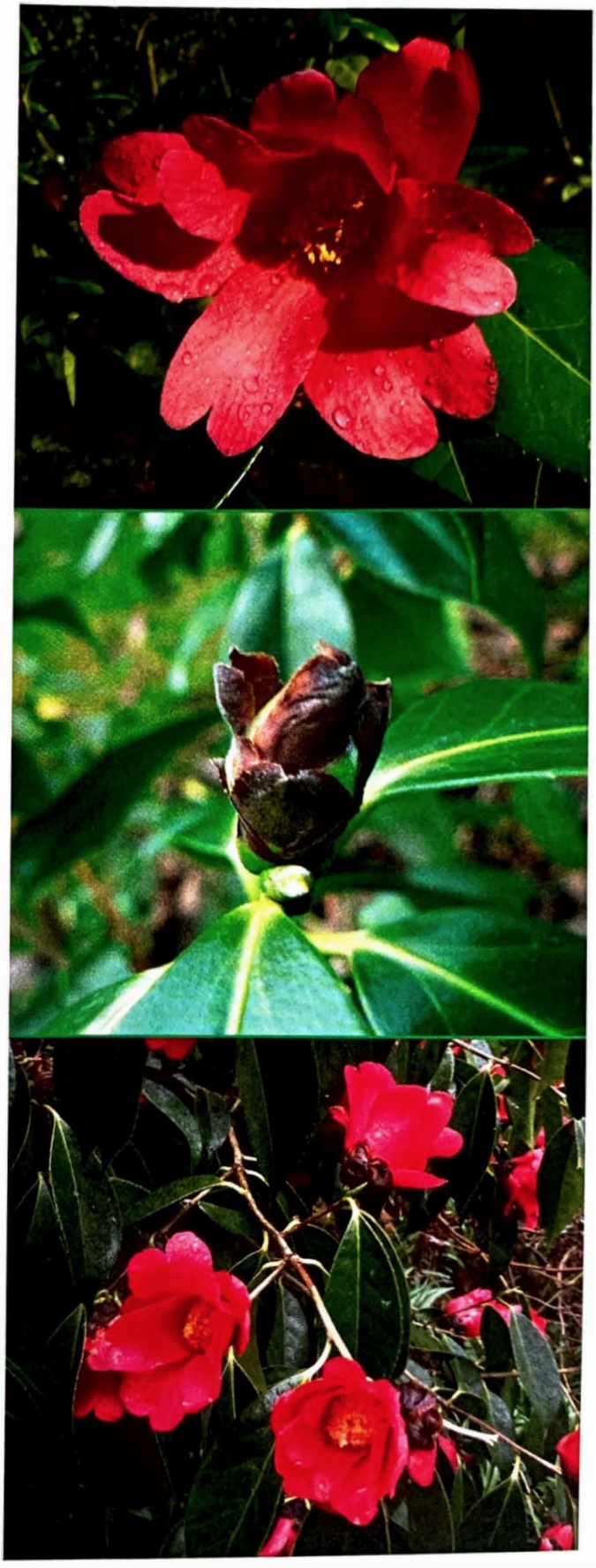
and *C. saluenensis*. Their relative merits as species are already well known and their influence on the vast treasurehouse of garden camellia hybrids is immense. In addition, *C. cuspidata* has been quite widely grown for many years.

Much less is known of other species. Some have been brought into cultivation over the last 20 years or so and the following notes are an early assessment of a few – an attempt to establish their relative garden value and their ability to perform well in quite a cold spot in southeast England.

My garden in Kent is cold, on a hogsback at about 150m and exposed, but normally not subject to late spring frosts as the heavier cold air slides off down the hill. Wind shelter is paramount and my plants are sheltered from the north and east; such cold wind shelter is vital. Plants came through the persistent freezing easterlies of 2012/13 without damage. Rainfall averages about 760mm (30in) a year. I have tried to optimise the conditions under which camellia species are grown in that they all have part shade in light woodland and some humidity and top cover from neighbouring trees. All are in a well-drained position, generally free from tree root competition, but evidently able to cope with this, once established. Moisture is necessary during growth and good light is desirable for freedom of flower and ripening of late growth.

Bearing in mind that all species vary from seed, many of those described are of excellent garden value and should be worth trying anywhere in the south in similar conditions. In a milder, wetter situation in the west and along the coast they undoubtedly perform even better and the potential range is significantly extended.

Several species can hold their own with the best of the garden hybrids in flower and foliage. Of three large-flowered red species, the spectacular large red flowers of *Camellia chekiangoleosa* warrant inclusion in any collection. Once widely cultivated in eastern China for the high quality of its edible oil, it has reached 2.5m here in eight years from planting. It is a tough, vigorous pyramid of bold glossy large elliptic leaves (typically 16 × 5cm) studded with large cupped flowers of a vivid clear blood red, larger than those of typical *C. japonica*. It is



CAMELLIA CHEKIANGOLEOSA is impressive as a garden-worthy species for its large and striking flower (*TOP*), distinctive flower bud (*CENTRE*), and generous floral display
ANGELA BRABIN/MAURICE FOSTER

CAMELLIA SEMISERRATA MAURICE FOSTER

said to be variable in flower colour, but in a good red form it is outstanding. Ted Brabin rates it highly in his garden on the Wirral in Merseyside where it has grown vigorously for six years and flowered well.

So far as I am aware, *Camellia polyodonta* has not yet flowered anywhere outside in the UK. Although from quite low elevations in northwest Guangxi, it is described as moderately hardy and a small plant has come through two winters here with a low of –5°C with no problem. The large flowers are normally a bright red, but there are pink forms. *C. semiserrata* is a warm temperate plant of south China, also with big red flowers and bold foliage, and leaves serrate only in the upper half. This has not yet been exposed to the rigours of the open garden here and not yet flowered either here or as a 2m plant in Tom Hudson's garden at Tregrehan in Cornwall. In China it is conspicuous in flower.

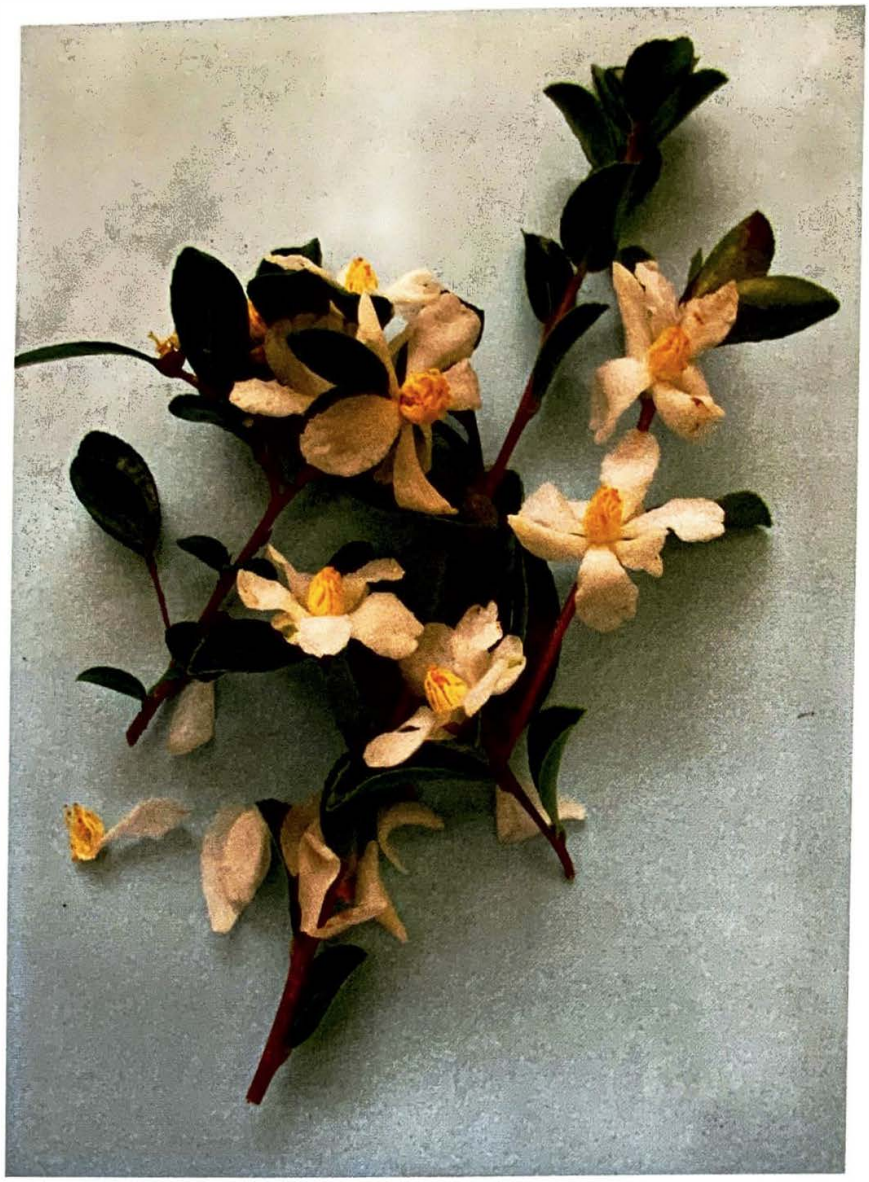
Perhaps the best of the white-flowered species that should be more widely grown is *Camellia trichocarpa*. From southeast Yunnan and southwest Guizhou at altitudes up to 2300m, it should be moderately hardy and in my garden three plants have been growing strongly without problem for five years. The 5–6cm white flowers appear in early spring and have a large central boss of bright yellow, spreading stamens and are beautifully presented on an upright shrub (reaching about 2m after five years) among distinctive dark green 11 × 5cm wavy edged leaves with deeply impressed veins.

Ming reduced *Camellia trichocarpa* to a subspecies of *C. henryana*, but in cultivation the two are quite different. While the flowers are similar in style, those of the latter are smaller and it has a loose, spreading habit, with notably acuminate, smaller (7 × 3cm), lanceolate leaves, more widely spaced on arching shoots. It has perhaps the best red young growth of all. Reddish, coppery young growth is an attractive character of many species and is also a feature of *C. yunnanensis*, often confused with *C. henryana*, both flowering from late October into winter, in spells of milder weather and continuing into early spring. The flowers are relatively large, up to 8cm, produced both terminally and in the upper axils, with the white petals reflexing to give still more prominence to the yellow stamens. It regularly produces a good crop of conspicuous large fruits, like purple-cheeked apples. It is a bushy plant for all seasons and gives good value in the garden. All three of these related species have striking, smooth fawn bark, like pale suede, and with age worth pruning to make it a visible and attractive feature.

In common with all autumn-flowering species, they are also unspoiled by petal blight, which is generally not in evidence until the spring.

THE ATTRACTIVE BARK OF *CAMELLIA TRICHOCARPA* TOM HUDSON

FLORAL VARIETY IN CAMELLIA SPECIES ADDS TO THEIR INTEREST IN THE GARDEN
(*TOP LEFT*) *CAMELLIA TRICHOCARPA*; (*TOP RIGHT*) *CAMELLIA YUNNANENSIS*; (*BOTTOM LEFT*) *CAMELLIA FORRESTII*; (*BOTTOM RIGHT*) *CAMELLIA GRIJSII*
SALLY HAYWARD/MAURICE FOSTER/SALLY HAYWARD



CAMELLIA BREVISTYLA ABBIE JURY

Also white-flowered but entirely different in character are *Camellia forrestii*, *C. grijsii* and *C. brevistyla*. All have small flowers on substantial shrubs and have proved to be hardy – so far – and all have achieved about 3m after 7–10 years.

Camellia forrestii is free-flowering, terminally and in the leaf axils. The flowers are quite small, 3–4cm across, slightly cupped and just about fragrant. Leaves have a slight gloss, ovate, typically 6 × 2.5cm on a bushy neat shrub. From Yunnan and found up to 2500m, it has been perfectly at home here and the two plants are fringed by dozens of self-sown seedlings. A 15-year-old plant grows well at Ness Botanic Gardens.

Camellia grijsii is similar, but more upright and with distinctive foliage. Leaves are broadly ovate, 6 × 4cm, glossy, stiff and hard, with impressed reticulate veining. The fragrant flowers, 5–6cm across, have a distinctive cleft in the end of the petal. It has a long flowering season from late winter to early spring. It has proved a quick grower, reaching about 3m in seven years. Both Chang and Ming sank *C. yuhsienensis* into *C. grijsii* but the former is bigger in all its parts and may be better regarded as a subspecies; it has come through two winters here, but not yet flowered.

Camellia brevistyla, native of Japan, Korea and Taiwan, flowers in the autumn, usually beginning about the end of October, continuing over some weeks, depending on the weather. Flowers are small, 3–5cm across, smaller than those of *C. grijsii* and slightly fragrant. Leaves are also small, broadly ovate, some 4.5 × 3cm, and glossy. While not spectacular, it flowers at a useful time and it is a neat, upright, densely foliaged evergreen, attaining around 3m after 8 years. Its variety *C. brevistyla* var. *rubida* has distinctive, small pink flowers.

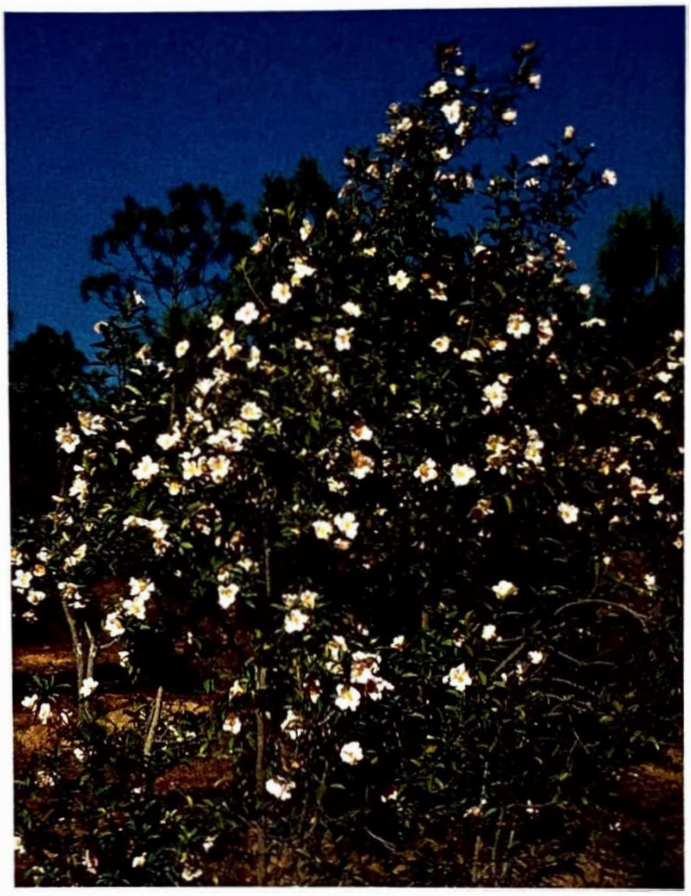
Camellia pitardii has a wide distribution in China. It is very variable in habit and in flower, the colour ranging from rich pink to white and, in a good form, flowers are of high quality. Some of the pinks are clear, with little of the more typical vinous underlay. I have three specimens, all growing well after nine years and all slightly different; the best from a garden viewpoint is 2m × 2m across, with an open habit and clustered flower buds, both terminal and axillary, with up to twelve on less than 25cm of stem. The elegant open funnel-shaped flowers are a clear shell pink, up to 8cm in diameter and open in succession over a long period in spring. It is an excellent plant often confused with *C. saluenensis*, parent of the great *C.* × *williamsii* race. I understand that the key distinguishing character of the latter is a

small gland at the tips of the leaf serrations, visible with a hand lens. This species is also very attractive in a good form.

Ming treated *Camellia tunganica* as a white form of *C. pitardii*, (f. *alba*). It is deliciously fragrant and on a mild, still spring day the fragrance carries, even from a few flowers. The habit is rather gangly, open and vigorous, flowering and making 1.5 × 1.5m in three years from planting. The white flowers are of medium size, some 6–8cm in diameter and the leaves serrulate, waved and about 12 × 4cm. Its fragrance makes it distinctive.

The Taiwanese species *Camellia transnokoensis* is now well known and frequently planted. It has turned out to be surprisingly hardy and its dense bushy habit, small leaves and abundance of small flowers in spring make a great display. A form with dark pink buds, the colour retained on the back of the outermost petals when open, is particularly attractive. It is an excellent candidate for a small garden. Ming merged this species into the fragrant Japanese *C. lutchuensis* which is similar in foliage and flower. This has not yet flowered here and its cold hardiness is as yet untested, but at Tregrehan, Tom Hudson finds it sweetly fragrant, very free-flowering with an elegant spreading habit and, although a warm temperate plant in the wild, as hardy as *C. transnokoensis*, both untroubled by –7°C.

The narrow and wavy-edged leaved *Camellia fluviatilis*, *C. kissii* and *C. tsaii* are slow growing here and have each survived three winters, but not yet flowered. All have small white flowers



CAMELLIA PITARDII IN YUNNAN MAURICE FOSTER

and are well-tried species in Cornwall, where conditions are mild, but by no means frost free. Many others thrive there and Tom Hudson grows what is certainly the widest range in the UK at Tregrehan including *C. bailinshanica*, a large grower, spreading to 3m, with flowers varying from pink to red (this has not succeeded in Kent); *C. xylocarpa* with a single pink flower rather like *C. reticulata*, with bold glossy foliage on a 3m

CAMELLIA SALUENENSIS MAURICE FOSTER

CAMELLIA PITARDII MAURICE FOSTER

CAMELLIA SPECIES UNDER TRIAL IN UK GARDENS
(*TOP LEFT*) PROVEN PERFORMER *CAMELLIA TRANSNOKOENSIS*; (*TOP RIGHT*) *CAMELLIA LUTCHUENSIS*;
(*BOTTOM LEFT*) *CAMELLIA FLUVIATILIS*; (*BOTTOM RIGHT*) *CAMELLIA HANDELII*

SALLY HAYWARD/TOM HUDSON/GENE PHILLIPS

CAMELLIA BAILINSHANICA IS ONE OF THE MORE TENDER SPECIES ON TRIAL IN UK GARDENS MAURICE FOSTER

plant, and *C. tuberculata* with showy young coppery foliage and medium sized white flowers. The promising *C. edithae* has reached 2m but not yet flowered. It has densely villous, rugose foliage and red flowers. Several forms have been cultivated in eastern China as ornamentals.

Other plants at Tregrehan now gaining recognition are *Camellia costei*, *C. handelii*, *C. minutiflora*, *C. parvilimba*, *C. caudata*, *C. salicifolia*, *C. assimilis* and *C. viridicalyx*. These are as yet untried outside here in colder Kent.

These notes offer a mere glimpse into a future full of exciting potential. This looks likely to be a continuously expanding range of new plants which are beginning to prove their value in gardens. It is significant that they perhaps can offer both beauty and interest in a more demanding range of garden conditions than their more benign origins might seem to allow.

They also offer enticing potential for hybridists, to produce new styles of hardy camellias for general planting, with advances in flower, foliage and form. The future is bright.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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is a Friend of the Woody Plant Committee and a former Chairman of the Group