

Camellia Propagation and Cultivation in the South West of England[©]

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INTRODUCTION

From Cornwall in the far west to Dorset in central southern England, the climate seems to be ideal for growing camellias, including some of the more tender subtropical species such as *Camellia transnokoensis* and even, in some very sheltered gardens, the difficult and tender Hong Kong species *C. granthamiana*. *Camellia sinensis*, originally known as “tcha”, and of considerable economic importance as the source of tea leaves, clones of which are not particularly tender, seems to thrive in some gardens provided there is enough air circulation in winter. A tea plantation is even being established at Tregothnan near Truro.

Flower bud formation is generally prolific as, with a relatively low incidence of damaging spring frosts (but this is by no means a frost-free area), growth starts early enough for shoots to be sufficiently mature to initiate buds at the ideal time — a couple of weeks around midsummer’s day. Both the spring flowering taxa and the autumn flowering sasanqua types usually have the benefit of suitable weather for flying insects to pollinate the blooms, so seed set is better than in most other parts of Britain. This makes life easy for breeders who rely on open pollination, but also makes life difficult for people who are asked to identify the myriad of mature, unnamed seedlings which proliferate under and around some of the venerable bushes, particularly in many of the great Cornish and Devon gardens. Some of the owners of these were also the recipients of many of the imported named cultivars, which came into the country in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Many came from Japan and were re-named with English or Latinised names: ‘Konron koku’ became ‘Nigra’ and ‘Hagaromo’ became ‘Magnoliiflora’. These, and others originating in France, Italy, and Belgium, were widely planted. The best of them have stood the test of time and are still propagated in the nursery trade today. There are some fine plants of many of them to be seen in gardens everywhere in the West Country. It is no wonder that it is in Cornwall that many successful camellia cultivars have been produced, although there are of course some which have been named and registered as tributes to family, friends, and employees which are of no particular merit.

CAMELLIAS AT CAERHAYS CASTLE

The most significant contribution has been from Caerhays Castle near Mevagissey in Cornwall, principal home of the Williams family and the site of one of Cornwall’s greatest and most interesting gardens, filled with trees, shrubs, and other plants collected by its owners, especially by John Charles Williams. It is the home of many unusual plants sent back by some of the great plant collectors of the late 19th century and early to mid 20th centuries, including Ernest Wilson, Frank Kingdom-Ward and especially George Forrest. Williams already had mature plants of a range of *C. japonica* cultivars, and *C. sasanqua*, *C. × vernalis*, and *C. hiemalis*, plus *C. cuspidata*, when he agreed to be one of George Forrest’s sponsors for his plant hunting expeditions in southern China. He was therefore a natural choice as

someone to receive seeds collected on expeditions between 1917 and 1925. These yielded, amongst much else, a new camellia species eventually named *C. saluenensis* because of the source of one of these consignments — an area near the Salween river in Yunnan Province.

Williams soon found that *C. saluenensis* flowered profusely and that there were forms with a range of shades of pink to the palest tones to deep pink with an almost purple shade. It also set seed readily. It was therefore natural that he should choose it for his hybridisation experiments. He used pollen from his plant of *C. japonica* 'Alba Simplex' on the palest pink flowered *C. saluenensis* and produced a number of seedlings as a result. It is unfortunate that we do not know the dates and details of this work as his records were lost when his briefcase was stolen during the night as he was travelling on the sleeper train en route to a Royal Horticultural Society committee meeting in London. It is thought that the first hybrids were produced between 1923 and 1925, but although he made some early selections, none were named until after his death on 29 March 1939.

Origination dates of selected hybrids from the original crossings are: 'J.C. Williams' 1940, RHS First Class Certificate in 1942; 'Mary Christian' (JCW's wife) 1942, RHS Award of Merit 1942, FCC in 1942; 'Saint Ewe' 1947, AM 1947; 'November Pink' 1950, AM 1950; 'Charles Michael' (JCW's head gardener) 1951.

So significant were these, and other similar hybrids, deemed to be, that the term 'Williamsii hybrids' was proposed by RHS Committee members and published as a valid name in August 1949, (Sir William Wright Smith). Californian camellia enthusiast and music publisher, Ralph Peer, who saw these much vaunted hybrids on a visit to London, was not so sure. He reported back that they were small bloomed and not at all exciting — but he was, after all, one of the two importers of the much more flamboyant and large-flowered *reticulata* hybrids from Kunning!

Also raised at Caerhays, as a selection from Forrest's wild collected seed, was *C. reticulata* 'Mary Williams' (after J.C. Williams's daughter), AM in 1942, FCC in 1964.

J.C. Williams used *C. cuspidata* to good effect too, making it the seed parent and this time, using *C. saluenensis* as the pollen parent. This produced a number of seedlings, from which *C.* 'Cornish Snow' was named. Masses of pink-tinged buds open to small white flowers, providing an outstanding plant for the landscape from January to the end of April in the south west. The similar but pinker bloomed *C.* 'Winton', sometimes incorrectly called *C.* 'Cornish Snow Winton', is probably a sister seedling, although it was raised at the Rothschilds' Exbury Gardens in Hampshire and subsequently grown and named at Hillier Nurseries. There was much giving and exchanging of plants then, as now.

WORK OF MORE RECENT BREEDERS

Gillian Carlyon of Tregrehan, Par, Cornwall, was a more recent breeder of camellias, producing a number of *C. × williamsii* and *C. cuspidata* hybrids in the 1970s. 'E.T.R. Carlyon', 1972, is a useful late-blooming white semi-double (*C.* 'J. C. Williams' × *C. japonica* 'Adolphe Audusson'), named after her father, while *C. × williamsii* 'Gwavas' is a × *williamsii* hybrid of strong bushy upright habit with rich pink, usually peony-form, flowers. It makes a good hedge, there's a fine example alongside the drive to Trewidden House and Gardens, near Penzance. It does not always flower freely away from the South West. Her *C.* 'Cornish Spring' (1973), is only recently beginning to gain popularity, now that small-flowered camellias are

more appreciated. Upright and bushy, with attractive bronze young growth, it is ideal for growing in small gardens and in containers. It performs best in semi-shade as the glowing pink flowers tend to bleach in strong sunshine.

Gillian Carlyon's nephew, Tom Hudson, is now in charge of the garden.

Trewithen House, at Probus, Cornwall, has one of the finest gardens in the county. Owner George Johnstone was friendly with Captain, later Colonel, Stephenson Clarke of Borde Hill in Surrey, breeder of the one camellia everybody knows; *C. xwilliamsii* 'Donation', which was named in 1941, just after *C.* 'J.C. Williams'. George Johnstone's first plant of *C.* 'Donation', given to him by the Colonel, proved useful as he was able to propagate from it and present the Colonel with a plant to replace the original *C.* 'Donation' which had died at Borde Hill. Trewithen's *C.* 'Donation' is regarded as being the source of all true *C.* 'Donation' plants in circulation today. Another *xwilliamsii* camellia, 'Glenn's Orbit', was named by George Johnstone as John Glenn the U.S.A. astronaut circled the Earth. This open-pollinated seedling of *C.* 'Donation' received an AM in 1962 despite its tendency to drop the centre of its blooms within a day or so of opening.

David Trehane, the author's late father, spent his "retirement" at Trehane near Tresillian in Cornwall, creating a wonderful garden from a wilderness. It also acted as the initial trial ground, particularly for the camellias he was sent in the 1970s and 1980s, by breeders such as Les Jury in New Zealand and David Feathers in California. At Trehane he assessed their general habits, flower forms, colours, etc. before sending them "up country" to the nursery in Dorset and to friends and trusted customers in more difficult climates further north for further trialling.

His link with Les Jury was particularly memorable. David Trehane was Les's agent for many years. Varieties from him, which are on most nursery lists and are in very wide circulation today, are almost all *xwilliamsii* and include *C.* 'Anticipation', *C. japonica* 'Debbie', *C. xwilliamsii* 'Elegant Beauty', *C. xwilliamsii* 'Joan Trehane' (a big rangy grower, quite unlike the author's very diminutive mother, for whom it was named), *C. xwilliamsii* 'Jury's Yellow', *C. xwilliamsii* 'Mirage', *C. xwilliamsii* 'Señorita', *C. xwilliamsii* 'Wilber Foss'. Les Jury's cousin, Felix, sent *C. xwilliamsii* 'Debbie's Carnation', a more free-flowering and more compact plant than *C. japonica* 'Debbie', and *C. xwilliamsii* 'Dream Boat', a beautiful formal double pink.

Varieties from David Feathers first trialled at Trehane include *C. japonica* 'Desire' (1977) which is proving very popular in garden centres all over Europe. *C. xwilliamsii* 'Contribution', an open-pollinated *C.* 'Donation' seedling from David Feathers, introduced in 1992, fills a gap in the market for low, slow-growing, very floriferous camellias for small gardens.

We must not forget that there are two National Collections of camellias in Cornwall, forming a useful gene bank. The National Collection of *C. japonica* at Antony House, near Torpoint, is well labelled and visually stunning in spring when they are in flower in the wooded valley where most are located. The National Collection at Mount Edgumbe, at Cremyll, not far from Torpoint, is wider, covering *C. japonica*, *C. xwilliamsii*, and other hybrids.

The work of propagating and distributing new camellia cultivars in the West Country goes on, with Trewhidden Nursery, near Penzance, sending out some of American Bill Ackerman's "cold hardy" hybrids, and Nigel Timpson and his team at Hewton Nurseries continuing to be on the trail of various other finds from around the world.