Camellias ❋ 30 March

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You often hear people talking about White House Farm, Maurice Foster's garden and arboretum, and on my first visit, a rare sunny day in March, I understood why. With his engaging personality and endless knowledge, Maurice almost outshines his own garden, you come here to see him as much as anything else.

The day started with perfect weather. I was pleased to see a blend of young as well as older people, which is quite common with IDS study days. It's always good to talk with other plant fanatics, which is not something you do every day, even (especially) if you work as a gardener. Many cut flowers of *Camellia* species and hybrids were nicely displayed in the centre of the table and we all sat around it, eager to hear the speakers.

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Maurice Foster introducing *Camellia* species and their history.

Maurice, delighted after receiving two plants of *Magnolia sinensis* from Raf Lenaerts (Botanic Treasures nursery, Belgium), was the first to speak. He was in charge of *Camellia* species and the stories behind their introduction into cultivation. He shared his experience with the main species, from the first introduced *C. japonica,* to the more recent introductions like *C. crapnelliana*. The introduction of *C. saluenensis* by George Forrest in 1924 was a turning point and allowed the creation of many famous hybrids with *C. japonica*, known as the *williamsii* hybrids. Forrest also brought back *C. tsaii*, a graceful species

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Jack Aldridge organising the samples. Striking single red, centre: 'Asahi-no-minato' (Higo type); front right pinks: 'Buttons 'n' Bows', 'Charles Colbert' (*williamsii* hybrids); back right: 'Lois Shinault', 'Doctor Clifford Parks', 'Hulyn Smith' (*reticulata* hybrids) discussed by Roderick White.

with wavy leaves, *C. taliensis*, an autumn flowering species, and the famous wild form of *C. reticulata.* Wilson, another famous plant collector, introduced *C. cuspidata* in 1900, a popular species with small but numerous white flowers. Maurice recalled his time with the army when he was walking in forests around Hong Kong, probably cutting his way through *C. granthamiana* shrubbery.

Jack Aldridge, a rising star of British horticulture, took Maurice's place to talk about *Camellia* hybrids in cultivation. He began with the Higo (a form of *japonica*) camellias which are all about the stamens and are closely associated with samurais. You need between 150 to 300 stamens to be a Higo; Jack challenged us to count but it was still a bit early in the morning and we risked getting a headache. Then Jack talked about the miniature flowering camellias as the future of *Camellia* hybrids. He mentioned three popular hybrids from the south-west of England: 'Winton', 'Cornish Snow' (*cuspidata* × *saluenensis*) and his favourite, 'Cornish Spring' (*cuspidata* × *japonica*) with bright pink flowers and red young growth.

The use of *C. lutchuensis* brought fragrance into some interesting modern hybrids. Jack mentioned 'Spring Mist', a compact form with white flowers, 'Scentuous' and 'Quintessence', a low shrub of spreading habit. 'Crimson Candles' (*fraterna* × *reticulata*) is also interesting for a small garden with its upright habit.

Roderick White was the last to speak. He shared his interest and knowledge of the big-flowered species, *Camellia reticulata*. Richard Rawes, captain of the Warren Hastings, introduced the first form (double) of *C. reticulata* in 1820, still known to this day as *C. reticulata* 'Captain Rawes'. 104 years later, George Forrest brought back the first single-flowered form from his travels in China.

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Above: *Camellia reticulata* hybrids 'Royalty' (left) and 'Leonard Messel' (right) in the garden.

Below: *Camellia trichocarpa*, with large flowers and attractive bark, was much admired.

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From that introduction, a few seedlings were named, such as 'Mary Williams' (Caerhays, Cornwall). Roderick mentioned the famous *reticulata* collection at Kunming Botanic Garden (Yunnan, China), which I had the chance to visit in 2018. It is actually separated from the main garden and you have to cross a road to reach it.

Good hybrids have been made using *C. reticulata*, for example 'Doctor Clifford Parks' (*japonica* × *reticulata*), a large semi-double form of upright habit, the more recent 'Blissful Dawn' (*reticulata* × 'Donation') and 'Red Crystal' (*japonica* × *reticulata*), with big leaves as well as flowers. Roderick had brought samples of leaves and flowers from specimens in his own garden. Most of them were donated to him as 3 m+ high plants which he managed to transplant successfully.

After sitting quietly and absorbing the words of our fine spokesmen, we were divided into two groups to see the plants for real in that wonderful display that is White House Farm Garden and Arboretum. I joined Maurice and Jack who were in charge of species. We headed for the arboretum and started with the quite common *C. transnokoensis* from Taiwan, with its small white flowers and upright habit. Then we were impressed by two different *chekiangoleosa* hybrids, both interesting with big bright red flowers. One of the two has a distinct conical form which adds to its ornamental value. Type specimen and hybrids of that species are not common in cultivation. Next, we walked by a subtle *C. forrestii* with its small leaves and small axillary white flowers.

The following stop was one of the highlights of the day, one of Maurice's favorites: *C. trichocarpa* from Yunnan, China. In Plants of the World Online it is listed as *C. yunnanensis* var. *camellioides*; in Kunming Botanic Garden I remember the label as *C. yunnanensis* var. *trichocarpa*. Maurice believes it is misidentified as a form of *C. yunnanensis*. It is a truly remarkable plant displaying big white flowers with a showy centre of yellow stamens and cinnamon-like bark. In autumn, the fruits are the size of small apples. A personal favourite was a plant labelled *C. bailinshanica* which had bright red young growth. I have never seen anything like it before, definitely a plant to keep an eye on.

In such a collector's garden, it is difficult to stay focused on just the camellias. Other highlights from different genera include two different forms of *Melliodendron xylocarpum* which were in full flower, the very rare *Quercus hondae* from Japan and the unique *Viburnum sympodiale* with its red heart-shaped young leaves. It is not often that I find a woody plant I have never seen before – on that morning it happened several times.

After a quick lunch and sharing first impressions with others, I headed for the second tour of the day with Clare Foster, one of Maurice's daughters, and Roderick White. They were in charge of cultivars and hybrids and we mainly stayed in the older part of the garden, around the house. We started with an impressive specimen of *Magnolia doltsopa* in full flower, spreading its sweet scent around us. Sadly we learned that the tree will be removed because the

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Camellia chekiangoleosa hybrid with a distinctive conical shape.

roots are damaging the house. I have to admit I wasn't as focused on camellias as I was in the morning, being more of a species person. Still, a few specimens caught my attention:

- 'Nicky Crisp', one of Maurice's favourites, with light pink semi-double flowers, a *pitardii* hybrid;
- 'Satan's Robe', another semi-double, red flowers and upright habit, a *reticulata* hybrid;

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Flowering *Magnolia doltsopa* by the house.

Melliodendron xylocarpum

- 'Winton', one of my favourites, almond pink single flowers with orange anthers, a *saluenensis* × *cuspidata* hybrid named at Hillier Nurseries.

It was nice to see camellias growing rather freely, as they are not pruned harshly here. Some old specimens from the late '70s/early '80s are now quite impressive. During the tour, one plant puzzled everyone, myself included. At first we thought it was an *Ilex* or a *Buxus*; it had very small evergreen leaves with red axillary flowers. It turned to be *Myrsine africana* (African boxwood), which I had not noticed before.

To finish a perfect day, we gathered to sit down with Maurice, Clare, Jack and Roderick. It was time for all of us, around 30 people, to discuss our 'plants of the day'. We had to name one favourite *Camellia*, one non-*Camellia* and explain our choices. *Camellia trichocarpa* won without contest along with *Melliodendron xylocarpum*, both in full flower and enhanced by the brilliant sunshine we had all day. Other plants were mentioned several times, such as *Viburnum sympodiale*, *Quercus hondae* and *Magnolia doltsopa*.

It was well worth travelling from France to spend such quality time with plants and people. I will come back for sure!