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Historical Facts on the Camellias of Oporto

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is presented as another opinion concerning the age of the old specimens of *C. japonica* growing in the garden of the Conde de Campo Bello at Oporto, Portugal. Following a visit to Portugal in 1957, Dr. Frederick G. Meyer, Crops Research Service, United States Department of Agriculture, Beltsville, Maryland, writing in *Plant Explorations* (published October 1959 by the U.S. Department of Agriculture) stated, evidence indicated that these specimens were the oldest in Europe, having been planted about the middle of the 16th century. Subsequently, there appeared in the *Camellian* March 1960, (published by Frank Griffin & Son, 25-33, Arcade Building, Columbia, South Carolina) an article entitled "An Astounding Revelation, Camellia History Changed" based it is stated on Dr. Meyer's original report and on information supplied by Mr. Joaquim Moreira da Silva. This is the article referred to by Mr. Alfredo Moreira da Silva. Most camellia historians give the date of the earliest European introduction as "about 1739," when records show that *C. japonica* was grown by Lord Petre in England.

UNDER the heading "An Astounding Revelation, Camellia History Changed" some statements have been made which caused me to investigate and present the following clarification.

As will be seen, my opinion on the subject is the same as that held by ancient camellia historians, namely that the camellia was first introduced into England in 1739 and did not reach Portugal until between 1800 and 1810 when it was brought by the English port wine traders.

These men came with their families to live on both sides of the Douro River in Oporto. Knowing how strong and acid was the soil in Oporto and the mildness of the climate, they wanted to experiment with growing camellias. Thus they brought this plant to Oporto from England where it had been cultivated in greenhouses for nearly a century.

There was in Portugal, as nearly all over the world where the camellia plant could be adapted, a real passion for its cultivation. Almost everybody would plant dozens or hundreds of camellias according to his finances and amount of ground. In Portugal the "golden age" of the camellia was between 1800 and 1900, and this passion for the camellia was developed by José Marques Loureiro who, from 1850 to 1895, brought to our notice the old and new varieties, and in his *Jornal de Horticultura Prática*, he and his numerous and distinguished collaborators taught us better ways to reproduce, adapt, and cultivate camellias.

In the *Jornal de Horticultura Prática*, volume 13, on page 106 and following, in the year 1882, José Marques Loureiro wrote an account of the camellia introduction. A translation follows:

A native of Japan and cultivated there and in China since early times, the camellia was introduced into Europe in 1739 but it was only at the beginning of this [19th] century when the beautiful varieties of double flowers and various colours which we admire so much today were obtained, that this plant gained a reputation which has never diminished.....

The first camellias that came to Oporto in 1800 to 1810 were ordered by Mr. Van-Zeller and other well-known amateurs, some of whom then occupied high positions in the Custom-House of Oporto. They were Messrs. Silvestre, of Santa Catharina Street; José Vicente, of Vilar Street; and Bento Gomes, of Carregal Circus.

We can still see today in the places that we have mentioned above some of these original camellias such as the 'Peonia' in the garden that belonged to José Vicente, with a trunk higher than 16 meters and a very wide dome-shaped top of enormous circumference; the 'Pomponia Alba'; the 'Pomponia Rosea'; the 'Anemona Cadente'; the 'Rajada' or 'Almiscarada' today known by the name of 'Variegata' and, finally, the 'Myrtifolia Chineza' and 'Alba Plena' which are the only ones of the old kind that we still cultivate as they are indeed outstanding.

From the camellias 'Pomponia Alba,' 'Pomponia Rosea' and 'Variegata' came the first seedlings ever to be grown in Oporto, and it was on the property of Fiães, the Vila Nova de Gaia, belonging to Mr. Van-Zeller, that the first seedling varieties were obtained. To be sure, they were at first of no great beauty; later they improved, and later still some became famous.

In the meantime the foundations were laid to bring the plant up to the perfection that we have today. And so from the gardens of Messrs. Pamplona, today Conde de Rezende; Warsemayer, from Massarellos; Allen, from Restauração, the nursery of Virtudes, etc., came successively numerous varieties, some of which are of recognized merit.

In 1844 there appeared the 'Bela Portuense,' the 'Anagua de Venus,' the 'Picturata Plena Portuensis,' still cultivated today. The 'Picturata Plena Portuensis' was the first to grow on the property of Fiães, and the 'Bela Portuense' was obtained by Padre Manoel Silvestre, dedicated amateur of plants who later did a good business in the cultivation of camellias.

As seedlings were being cultivated in Oporto and new varieties were obtained, the amateurs asked for those which were appearing in markets abroad. In this way the camellia 'Smithy', then called 'Rajada Fina', was introduced in this city; the 'Stenano' which is called 'Conde de Farrobo' but the real name of which is called 'Leana Superba'; the 'Sweetiana' known by the name of 'Anagua Ingleza.' All of these were imported from England by Mr. Antonio Ferreira Pinto Basto.

In 1846 there began to appear many first class varieties, introduced by Mr. Belens, great amateur of plants who, at that time, lived in Massarellos. Among these the variety that attracted the greatest attention of amateurs and which is still much sought after today was the 'Collettii Vera', then called 'Conde de Paris'....

On page 136, volume 10, in the year 1879, Conselheiro Antonia de Camillo Aureliano tells us in the same *Jornal de Horticultura Prática*:

I had a friend who has passed away; for whom I mourn every day. Seldom a week passed that he didn't come to see me. He came into my garden as if it were his own; if he found me there hours would pass in happy talks on agriculture and horticulture; if he didn't find me when I returned I would find my bushes covered here and there with visiting cards on which I read:

Roberto Van-Zeller

What delightful days we spent with him, my family and I together with other relatives of mine on his property of Fiães, where the famous soup made with lard, cooked by the greatly valued manager, never failed to appear for dinner!

On page 120, volume 2, in the same *Jornal de Horticultura Prática*, in the year 1871, José Duarte de Oliveira makes it clearer to us as follows:

Glancing at the prosperous state of this species in our country we can't help congratulating ourselves because there are already several hundred different varieties cultivated. Though most of them are of foreign origin, many were sown in Portugal, and so we may consider them Portuguese.

These are for the most part the sowings made in Oporto and its suburbs by those who are passionately fond of this beautiful species. Amongst the most fortunate we must mention Messrs. Roberto Van-Zeller, the Visconde de Villar Allen, Conselheiro Camillo Aureliano da Silva e Sousa, and José Marques Loureiro. The last mentioned name should perhaps be put first, but we have purposely left it till the end so that we can devote two lines of praise, because in this particular case, as in many others, he has rendered very real service to the agriculture. A wholehearted amateur, endowed with an unquenchable love for camellias, he has devoted himself for a very long time to their cultivation and little by little has made a collection of all kinds so that today he unquestionably possesses the best collection in Portugal. To obtain these results he not only imported annually a specified number of them, but organized large quantities of sowings from which he always got the most magnificent varieties, and from those originated a great number of the Portuguese camellias that today adorn our gardens and that many people believe to be from abroad. Etc., etc.

In a catalogue without date (but which we think must have been issued in 1884), that we have before us, the great amateur, cultivator, and trader of camellias, José Marques Loureiro, presents for sale a collection of 868 varieties of camellias.

Why, in this half century, from 1850 to 1900, the "golden age of the camellia," when all the well-known families in Oporto, Vila Nova de Gaia, and some of the greatest names in the Provinces met together at the camellia shows to talk about camellias, did no one oppose what had been written or what had been said?

On these occasions the Count of Campo Belo and the Count of Monfalim were in agreement with the writings and conversations of the time—much easier to refute then than now. All these gentlemen, and many others, upheld and collaborated with José Marques Loureiro, Camillo Aureliano, and José

Duarte de Oliveira, the latter of real and proved worth as much abroad as in his own country. The first camellias brought to Europe may in fact be found in Portugal, but the above do not verify such an assumption.

It has been currently claimed that in 1558 the Portuguese explorer, Fernão Mendes Pinto, and Saint Francisco Javier brought many plants, including camellias, from Japan to Portugal. These plants are said to have been brought to the parents of Saint Francisco and planted at Montemor-o-Novo. However, the actual facts are these:—Saint Francisco was born in his parents' castle of Javier, Navarra, Spain. In the year 1542 he came to Portugal to ask the King of Portugal for permission to go to the parts of India recently conquered by the Portuguese and convert the people to Christianity. He died there in the year 1552. It is impossible to believe that Fernão Mendes Pinto could have, in 1558, brought the plants to the parents of Saint Francisco Javier if they had never lived in Montemor-o-Novo.

Was it the unusual size of these camellias at Campo Belo that induced Dr. Meyer to believe that the plants were the first camellias ever brought to Europe, or was it something else based on irrefutable and concrete evidence? On this point, Mendonca Falção, in the *Jornal de Horticultura Prática*, volume 3, in 1872 tells us:

In Portugal the introduction of the camellia into the provinces was at the end of the first quarter of this century and little more than twenty years since the propagation of the double varieties was begun, and perhaps only twelve years since serious attention had been given to its cultivation.

All foreign writers who are interested in the camellia proclaim Italy, and especially Naples, to be the country best suited to the cultivation of the camellia in the open air in Europe, and never fail to quote as a proof the celebrated camellia (simple) planted in 1760 in the gardens of Caserta, belonging to the King of Naples. They don't hesitate even to call it the oldest of the camellias because of its age and size and because from it are descended the sowings of nearly all the camellias in Europe.

All amateurs of this species who visit Italy are invited to go and admire that enormous leafy tree that can glory in having shaded the first great botanists and horticulturists of Europe who have visited it . . .

The camellia lives in the open air almost all along the Atlantic Coast and French Mediterranean and in some privileged parts in the interior, such as Angers, the Loire Valley, the heart of the garden of France. Lake Maggiore, Piedmont, Florence, Rome, Venice, and especially Naples don't require winter coverings for the camellia because of their nearness to the sea. In Portugal it lives well in the open air almost everywhere, on the coast as well as in the interior in the provinces of the north, and if it doesn't thrive equally well in the south, in my opinion this can be attributed to the excessive heat in summer in some places, and to the natural calcareous soil and the water with which it is watered. Even there when in fresh, airy, and suitable ground, it lives luxuriously as in Cintra—neglected, uncared for, without being cultivated, and spreads in the woods of the Royal Palace at Penna as in its primitive state in its native country.

The botanists state the absolute necessities for the acclimatization of plants as: (1) The plant will grow in the open air to the same dimensions and luxuriance as in its native land; (2) it will produce fertile fruit and seed; (3) it will grow up naturally from the seeds that fall to the ground;

(4) it will give flower and fruit as quickly as in its native land, etc. I think my purpose has been proven and shows that all these conditions suit the camellia grown in Portugal to a much greater degree than in the other countries of Europe and help it to attain greater dimensions than in its natal country. Therefore, the fertility in our country is one more proof, among many, to add to those given it by our poet when he says:

"O pomo que da Pátria Persia veio,
Melhor tornado em terreno alheio."

"The fruit that comes from its native Persia
becomes better in a foreign ground."

First condition for acclimatization: If in Caserta the single camellia planted in 1760 (112 years ago) has already reached 10 meters in height, I can, together with many others, mention a fact that I have in my country that completely annuls the singularity of the shrub in Naples.

My neighbour and good friend the Rev. Bernardino Correia de Barros has for 20 years cultivated a lovely garden of camellias in which he specialized, in Folgosa, in the district of Castro Daire, where he lives. And it can be said, in honour of this unwearying and clever amateur that he cultivates the camellia with incomparable care, solicitude, and perfection, especially in training the infinitely varied forms that he knows so well how to produce.

I think I may even say without fear of being contradicted that his garden possesses the most beautiful specimens that perhaps there are in the country.

Actually, camellias can be seen there trained like the *Cupressus fastigiata* with an irreproachable straightness and regularity, which have shot up to a height of 7 meters from the ground.

In confirmation of these facts we have the camellias planted by my grand-father Alfredo Moreira da Silva between 1897 and 1899 in the garden of Dona Jane Andressén which is now the botanical garden of Oporto. These camellias after 60 years have grown into thick hedges with a height of 4 meters and stems of one-fourth meter in diameter, in spite of being pruned regularly. If they had been allowed to grow uninterrupted with unlimited space, what dimensions would they have today?

In 1920 I saw my grand-father plant a small camellia 'Magnoliaeflora' (Syn. 'Hagoromo') in our nurseries at Campanhã, Oporto, and this same camellia, in spite of being pruned for reproductions is today 5 meters high with a stem of 0.2 meters in diameter.

I am Portuguese and it would be an enormous satisfaction to me if Dr. Meyer were able to prove the statements he made. If I had been told that seeds of spices, or even the plants themselves, had been brought to be acclimatized and to be cultivated nearer home instead of going so far to get them, that would have been understandable. But we must remember and take into account the months that these journeys took, the dangers that waited them on every side, and principally the scarcity of water that usually was rationed; and often there was no water even to ration.

The camellia is indeed an extraordinary plant, but no one will convince me that in its native land it could be such a beautiful specimen that it would induce pioneers to bring it and to care for it and to save it in the way that it is said Camões brought, cared for, and saved his immortal poem "Os Lusíadas."