

CAMELLIAS



Camellia japonica Jean Clere

Camellias have long been a favourite in our gardens, especially as they are often harbingers of spring, their colourful blooms bringing some much-needed cheer at the end of winter. Our latest speaker, Jeremy Wilson, brought his extensive knowledge of camellias to the village hall on Friday, 10th September as well as some camellia plants and a wonderful array of photos to illustrate his talk.

The first evidence of use and cultivation of camellia plants in China is about 5,000 years old.

It was mainly tea, which is a species of camellia (*Thea sinensis* or *Camellia sinensis*). There is a long tradition of camellia growing in China and Japan, where tea was drunk long before our era, reputedly discovered by the legendary Shennong (but that's another story!). Nowadays, tea is drunk in 60 countries worldwide and 165 million cups of tea are drunk in Britain every day and we bought more tons of tea than munitions during the war!!

The genus "*Camellia*" owes its name to the posthumous tribute, by Karl Linnaeus, Swedish botanist and taxonomist, to George Joseph Kamel (1661-1706), apothecary and botanist in Jesuit institutions, who worked particularly in the Philippines. There are 267 named species and over 20,000 cultivars. At Stretgate Nurseries near Torquay, Jeremy has about 500 varieties. It is obviously a vast topic but Jeremy covered the most salient points during his talk.

Most of us are familiar with spring-flowering *Camellia japonica* but perhaps less well known is that *Camellia sasanqua* varieties are winter-flowering. *Camellia japonica* comes in a huge range of colours and flower forms – semi-double, anemone form, peony form, rose form and formal double, giving a stunning range of blooms e.g. Jean Clere (see photo) and Aspasia McArthur Margaret Davis. Many *Camellia sasanquas* have the single form (one layer of petals). They are graceful and airy - winter-flowering camellias; they are slow-growing, usually reaching a maximum height in the UK of 4 metres. Some examples are: 'Grijsii' - heart-shaped petals and fragrant; 'Pitardii', large-fruited camellia known for its ornamental flowers and its fruits, which contain an edible seed oil; 'Snow Flurry', hardy and flowers from late autumn into early winter.

A particular favourite of the Japanese is 'Higo' – a large, bushy, evergreen shrub with glossy, dark green leaves, pure white single, saucer-shaped flowers with a golden flare of stamens.

'Alba plena': has glossy medium leaves and incredibly beautiful medium-sized, formal double flowers, 3-4 in. wide with over 100 petals in porcelain white.



Camellia japonica 'Alba Plena'

The hybrid *Camellia x williamsii* is a cross between *Camellia japonica* and *Camellia saluenensis*, created by the great plantsmen J.C. Williams and Col. Stephenson Clarke at Borde Hill Gardens.

And there is a yellow camellia, 'Nitidissima'. As if the range of camellias were not enough, a new species of *Camellia Azalea* was found in a remote area of China 30-40 years ago. It flowers in summer and Jeremy hopes to launch the first cultivar in the not-too-distant future.

Camellias have something for everyone - shrub-like ones, trees or hedging plants. Planting should be done in the autumn because the soil is still warm. When planting, plant in a square hole - compost is not necessary. They are not as fussy as rhododendrons, requiring a soil ph. of 6-6.5. Most plants require semi-shade but they do need sunshine to set their flower buds in June, July and August. It is important to ensure that they do not dry out once they set their buds. Feed from March until end of August or every month if they are growing in a pot. Use an ericaceous feed and mulch using grass cuttings which encourages worm activity.

Pruning: If the shrub is too big it can be cut right down but won't flower for several years. Prune camellias as soon as they have finished flowering – stop the growth before it starts. The harder you prune the more the plant wants to grow. Cut to a replacement branch to encourage renewal.

Pests: There are various pests associated with camellias - vine weevil, which start hatching about now. Scale insects, sooty mould (fungus), chlorosis (yellowing leaves), virus – blotches, leaf blight – fungus won't damage the rest of the plant but burn diseased leaves so it won't spread. If there are too many buds for the plant to cope with, bud drop will occur. The soil must be kept moist because a seal develops round the bud if they are too dry.

Propagation: Take tip cuttings (see video on YouTube of how to take cuttings).

Jeremy recommends places to visit camellias: Mount Edgecumbe, Torpoint, has the National Camellia collection, Caerhays Castle, St. Austell and Marwood Hill Gardens, Barnstaple.