

## In the Bay Area, camellia fanciers create hybrids with enhancements

Angela Neal, Special to The Chronicle  
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During February and March, camellias around the Bay Area are at their most beautiful. Whether in gardens, parks or city plots, the showy white, pink and red flowers are a striking contrast against the glossy, dark-green foliage.

In Barbara Tuffli's Atherton garden, there are more than 500 camellias that run the gamut in color, shape and form. One named 'Hall's Pride' has intense vermilion blooms the size of a dessert plate, while another, 'Lutchuensis,' has diminutive thumbnail-size creamy fragrant flowers. Among the rich crimsons and pale pearlescent blooms is a rare yellow camellia.

Camellias, which have been popular in gardens since Victorian times, fall into four main categories: japonica; sasanqua; Higos, originally from Japan; and reticulata. Reticulata camellias were first introduced to Europe from Asia at the end of the 18th century and had arrived in the southern United States by about 1840.

They were favorites of the Victorians, who treasured the formal flowers. In the 1920s and '30s, garden styles changed, and as informal pastel drifts of perennials became fashionable, camellias were relegated to the shrubbery or used as labor-saving plantings. In the past 60 years, there has been a tremendous resurgence of interest and an explosion of new varieties.

Northern California is at the center of this reawakening, for several reasons. First, the moist, temperate climate enables the native varieties of Southeast Asia, Japan and China to thrive and flourish. Second, several significant shipments of new plants from China to Oakland raised awareness and enthusiasm in garden circles. Finally, and possibly most important, a few notable Bay Area individuals became active hybridizers, creating dozens of new hybrids to tempt the gardener with a variety of enhancements, such as dazzling new colors, fragrance, unusual forms and a longer blooming period.

Today, the Tuffli garden, which is a second-generation garden, reflects many of these advances and new trends. When the property was originally purchased in 1960 from the Swig family, who used it as a summer home, there were two camellia bushes flanking the front entrance.

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Tuffli's parents added camellias, many of which reach 20 feet into the native oak canopy. Tuffli's father became president of the San Francisco Peninsula Camellia Society, a group that promotes the care and culture of camellias with classes and lectures.

Tuffli, who inherited her father's enthusiasm, is past president of the society, which is holding a two-day camellia extravaganza in the Botanical Garden at Strybing Arboretum on Saturday and Sunday. It will be the first camellia festival and show to take place in San Francisco.

Exceptional show-quality blooms with names like 'Desire' and 'Tango' will be set out on tables for judging, giving the public an opportunity to see camellia flowers of many types and colors. There will be a plant sale and auction of hard-to-find or rare camellia plants, along with workshops on pruning and caring for the shrubs, which, though they appear exotic, are relatively easy to grow and flourish beautifully in pots on decks and balconies.

Additionally, there is a new camellia attraction at the garden. It has recently received a gift of 300 mature and rare camellias from an old Peninsula estate. The relocation of these specimens, some 20 feet high, required cranes and flatbed trucks. Most of these plants will be in place in time for the festival. It was Coco Chanel, who, always ahead of her time, immortalized a white camellia when she created a small, starched, linen flower that could be pinned to a suit. She captured the elegance of the camellia and unwittingly created a corporate logo.

Throughout history, camellias, including *C. sinensis*, from which black and green tea is made, have had a certain mystique and there's no better place than the Bay Area to take that magic to a new level and sophistication.

### Camellia show

-- The San Francisco Peninsula Camellia Society 44th Camellia Show and Auction. County Fair Building, San Francisco Botanical Garden at Strybing Arboretum. 12:30 to 4.30 p.m. Saturday, noon to 4 p.m. Sunday. Admission free. Special program venue: \$15.

The festival includes a Chinese New Year celebration, a demonstration by internationally known Chinese penzai (bonsai) expert and author Y.C. Shen, an ikebana flower-arranging demonstration by Yoshiko Williams, Chinese brush painting and Japanese tea ceremony in three separate seatings. The show also features serious horticulture, flower arranging and photography exhibitions, judged according to American Camellia Society rules as well as an auction of rare plants and workshops on camellia culture. Information: [www.camelliaspcs.org](http://www.camelliaspcs.org); P.O. Box 2103, Menlo Park, CA 94026; or (650) 728-3775.

-- San Francisco Peninsula Camellia Society Garden Tour: March 6. Information, [www.camelliaspcs.org](http://www.camelliaspcs.org).

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2005/02/16/HOG1IB65B132.DTL>

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