Camellia japonica 'Dewa-tairin'

By Daniel Mount

More than 200 species of *Camellia* live—with a concentrated and continuous distribution—in the wilds of Southeast Asia. But the camellia has become a global garden plant and, fortunately for us, many camellias seem to love our maritime Pacific Northwest climate.

At present, Washington Park Arboretum is home to 371 individual plants representing 211 different species, subspecies and cultivated varieties. *Camellia sasanqua* and its hybrids, *C.* × *williamsii* hybrids, *C. reticulata* hybrids, and even *C. sinensis* (the species whose leaves and buds are used to produce tea) are well represented here. However, the bulk of the collection consists of cultivars of the Japanese camellia (*C. japonica*).

My favorite among the latter is a pink-blossomed cultivar called 'Dewa-tairin', which translates to the "large-flowered-one from Dewa," the old name for a province in northern Japan comprised of modern-day Akita Prefecture and Yamagata Prefecture. 'Dewa-tairin' was first recorded in 1695 in Japan and was one of the first camellias to enter European gardens.

Graham Legacy

The Arboretum has three specimens of 'Dewa-tairin' dating to the 1940s in its main Camellia Collection. Two of these came from the home garden of none other than Donald G. Graham, whose legacy is commemorated in the name of our Graham Visitors Center. (The third came from Endre Ostbo, a prominent

early rhododendron hybridizer, who also has a memorial in the Arboretum.) One of the Graham specimens, dating to 1942, grows at the north end of the collection, close to stairs that descend from Arboretum Drive into Rhododendron Glen. The other, accessioned in 1947, is at the south end of the main collection, just north of the New Zealand Forest.

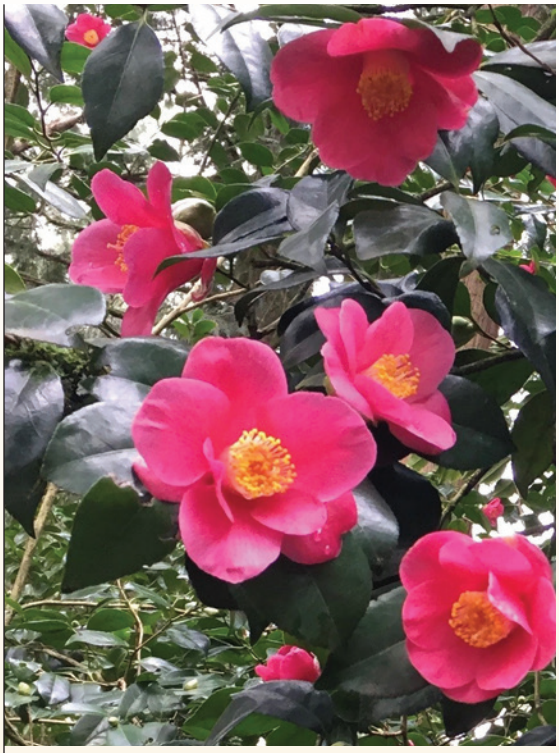
Graham was one of the founding members of the Arboretum Foundation and lived in neighboring Broadmoor. He built a house there in 1931 and immediately began developing a garden. His son, Donald Graham, Jr., recalls his father as having "a scholarly, collector's interest" in plants, in particular rhododendrons. But, I imagine, like the rest of the gardening community in the U.S., he got caught up in the camellia craze that swept the country shortly after World War II.

It was during this time that the Arboretum's camellia collection burgeoned. No less than 278 camellias were planted in 1945, with the support of a local garden group called, simply, the "Amateur Garden Club." A second mass planting of 200 specimens took place in 1949. Today, the many large, magnificent camellias we have are a testament to that early enthusiasm and the endeavors of many volunteers and staff.

Samurai Connection

'Dewa-tairin' certainly stands out among them. It is a big, bold bush (the Arboretum specimens are about 10 feet high by 12 feet wide) and one of the first japonicas to bloom in spring. The deep, rose-pink flowers are single (that is, they have a single count of petals) and get up to six inches wide (though five inches is nearer normal size), and each one is centered with more than 100 yellow stamens. The flowers are at once gaudy, almost tropical in appeal, and yet elegant—making them a rare treat in the late-winter garden.

Despite having a name linking it to a province in northern Japan, 'Dewa-tairin' is part of a group of camellias known as the "Higos" associated with the southern province of Higo, now called Kumamoto Prefecture. Famous for their flat, simple, large-petalled flowers with multiple (up to 250) showy stamens, Higos have a complex and ancient



The stunning, five- to six-inch-wide flowers of 'Dewa-tairin' appear in February in the Arboretum's main Camellia Collection.

genetic history. They were developed millennia ago through the hybridization of different forms of *C. japonica*, as well as the little known *C. rusticana*, and possibly even other species.

Because they bloom beautifully in cold winters, Higo camellias were beloved by the samurai, who saw them as symbols of steadfastness and bravery. They planted Higos by the graves of deceased samurai as reminders of the warriors' courage. After the fall of the samurai class in the 19th century, their popularity faded, and many cultivars were lost. However, a new surge in interest, especially in Japan and Italy, is bringing many old Higo camellias back into the public eye.

Once highly regarded among Higo camellias, 'Dewa-tairin' is "no longer ranked among the elite," according to camellia expert Stirling Macoboy in his book "The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Camellias" (Timber Press, 1998). That's because the plant can sometimes produce flared, petal-like stamens in its flowers—and some consider this a flaw. Yet, as

part of our collection, 'Dewa-tairin' is of great value.

In 2004, the "American Camellia Yearbook" recognized the Arboretum's collection as one of the best and oldest collections of vintage camellias in the U.S. Though many of these vintage cultivars have proven to be garden-worthy, most are no longer in commercial production. 'Dewa-tairin' seems to be one of those—even though it received the Royal Horticultural Society Award of Garden Merit in 1953 under one of it synonyms, 'Hatsu-Sakura', meaning "first cherry blossom."

'Dewa-tairin' can start blooming as early as February here, preceding most the flowering cherries in the park. If you can't take a tropical vacation at that time of year, stop by the Arboretum and enjoy some big, beautiful, tropical looking flowers in our important and venerable Camellia Collection.

Daniel Mount is an estate gardener, garden writer, and member of the "Bulletin" Editorial Board. He lives on a small farm in the Snoqualmie Valley. Read more of his reflections on plants and gardening at www.mountgardens.com.

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