

Camellia japonica

[Synonyms : *Camellia bonnardi*, *Camellia bonnardii*, *Camellia florida*, *Camellia hayaoi*, *Camellia hozanensis*, *Camellia japonica* var. *concava*, *Camellia japonica* var. *hexapetala*, *Camellia japonica* subsp. *hortensis*, *Camellia japonica* var. *hozanensis*, *Camellia japonica* forma *ilicifolia*, *Camellia japonica* var. *japonica*, *Camellia japonica* forma *lancifolia*, *Camellia japonica* forma *leucantha*, *Camellia japonica* forma *lilifolia*, *Camellia japonica* var. *longifolia*, *Camellia japonica* var. *macrocarpa*, *Camellia japonica* var. *nakaii*, *Camellia japonica* forma *otome*, *Camellia japonica* forma *parviflora*, *Camellia japonica* forma *polypetala*, *Camellia japonica* forma *trifida*, *Camellia kaempferia*, *Camellia mutabilis*, *Camellia nakaii*, *Camellia planipetala*, *Camellia sylvestris*, *Camellia tsubakki*, *Camellia tuckiana*, *Camellia wabiske*, *Kemelia japonica*, *Thea camellia*, *Thea hozanensis*, *Thea japonica*, *Thea japonica* var. *hortensis*, *Thea japonica* var. *spontanea*, *Thea nakaii*]

CAMELLIA (English, Spanish) is an evergreen shrub or tree. Native to Japan, Korea and Taiwan, it has pink, red, or white flowers with many yellow stamens.

It is also known as *Ægte kamelia* (Danish), *Camélia* (French, Portuguese), *Camélia du Japon* (French), Common camellia, *Housan tsubahki* (Japanese), *Jaapani kameelia* (Estonian), *Japanische Kamelie* (German), Japan rose, Japanese camellia, Japanese rose, Japonica, *Kamelia* (Danish, Swedish), *Kamelia japonska* (Polish), *Kamélia japonská* (Slovak), *Kamelie* (German), *Kamélie japonská* (Czech), *Kameliia iaponskaia* (Russian), *Kamelio Japania* (Esperanto), *Rosa-do-Japão* (Portuguese), *Rose du Japon* (French), *Shan cha* (Chinese), *Taiwan yama tsubahki* (Japanese), *Tsubahki* (Japanese), *Yabu tsubahki* (Japanese), and *Yama tsubahki* (Japanese); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of ‘alas my poor heart’ (red), excellence, fragility, innate worth (red), loveliness (red), perfected excellence (white), perfect loveliness (white), purity (white), supreme loveliness, unpretending excellence (red), and without blemish (white).

Tsubaki oil is extracted from the seeds.

Japonica means ‘of or from Japan’.

Some authorities have noted that the Japanese have prepared the leaves as a tea substitute (*Camellia sinensis*).

In Japan too the edible seed oil has been used not only in women’s hairdressing but also in the kitchen for cooking. The leaves have been/are used to make tea; while the flowers yield a dye, they are also edible and they have been/are used medicinally.

Camellia’s reputation for beauty long preceded the plant’s appearance in western Europe. Around 1700 a dried specimen of a single red variety was sent to England but it was not until 1739 that two plants (a single red and a single white) could be seen growing there successfully. Robert James, Lord Petre (1713-1742) cultivated these at Thorndon Hall in Essex (south-eastern England) and his gardener, James Gordon (1728-1791) [after his employer’s death] was the first nurseryman to promote camellias commercially as ornamental plants. Despite this however they did not acquire any significant popularity in that Country until the 1790s when several other varieties were introduced from China.

By the 19th Century, 100 years after Georg Kamel may have introduced it to Europe following his travels in the Far East, the camellia's romantic associations became firmly established.

It was Alexandre Dumas (1824-1895) who was ultimately responsible. He was the illegitimate son of the French novelist and playwright of the same name. Like his father he, too, wrote novels and plays and one of his first books in 1848 (based on his own experience) was *La Dame aux camélias* (converted 5 years later by Verdi (1813-1901) into the opera, *La Traviata*). Both Dumas and Franz Liszt (1811-1886) the Hungarian composer and pianist who, at the time in question, was considered to be at the height of his brilliance and was giving concerts throughout Europe, fell in love with Alphonsine Plessis (1824-1847) a celebrated Parisian courtesan. Sadly she died from tuberculosis when she was only 23 and in mourning both men filled her coffin and covered her grave with her favourite flower, the camellia.

In the mid-19th Century the flowers, then as now, were expensive and much admired. One Frenchman, a M. Latour Mézeray, acquired a reputation for the height of sartorial elegance, as he was never seen in the nineteen years he lived in Paris without a fresh camellia in his buttonhole. He came to be known as *L'homme aux camélias* – and it was remarked that his sojourn in the French Capital must have cost him 50,000 francs in camellias alone.

The flowers were equally fashionable in Britain. There ladies included them in designs on cushions, depicted them in watercolours, and wore them in their hair or on their hats. But for no particular reason camellias went out of favour for the last half of the 19th Century – only to revive in western Europe from the beginning of the 20th Century (with a brief interlude during the First World War).

In the United States the State of Alabama has adopted the flower as an emblem. The non-drying seed oil is used today in commercial hair oil preparations.