

TEA IN AMERICA

The Journey of Camellia sinensis

Story and photography by Gene Phillips

Most of us who have grown up in the Southeastern United States cannot remember a time when tea was not part of our lives. One of my earliest memories is of my grandfather “Pop” telling me to be careful and hold my glass of iced tea with both hands. It seems that everywhere in the south, iced tea is the drink of choice at restaurants for lunch or dinner. Can you imagine what the world would be like without sweet tea? Something that I have noticed recently is how many people in the south are beginning to enjoy hot tea as well.

Like most southerners, I grew up drinking iced tea in the afternoon and evening, but I always started the day with coffee. About three years ago, I stopped my morning coffee and replaced it with my morning tea, and I have been happier ever since. There seems to be more interest in tea these days than ever before but few of us understand where tea comes from, or how it became such an important part of our existence.

The most interesting fact about tea to me is that it comes from the leaves of the *Camellia* species called *Camellia sinensis*. All of us who love camellias have enjoyed the beautiful flowers and foliage of many other species of camellias without realizing that another camellia cousin is the source for one of our favorite drinks. In addition to the wonderful beverage that is made from *Camellia sinensis*, Tea plants are extremely beautiful as garden plants just like their

more popular cousins *Camellia japonica* and *Camellia sasanqua*. The flowers of Tea plants begin to bloom in the south in early August and can continue to bloom into January. One of the most interesting characteristics about Tea plants is their mass blooming of literally hundreds of small white flowers with yellow centers of pollen. The buds form all up and down the stems of the plant, so when they begin to bloom, it is very showy in the garden. Tea plants grow faster than most other species of camellias, and they have a wide range of cultural environments suitable for them. *Camellia sinensis* can be grown in shaded conditions with filtered sunlight all the way to full sun in the south. Another interesting fact about growing Tea in the garden is that gardeners can make their own tea fresh from the plants that they have grown. I have enjoyed tea from my garden, but I must admit that I find it much more convenient to pick up a few boxes of tea at the store each week.

Like all camellias, Tea is not native to America. *Camellia sinensis* originated in China, and it is here that the legend of Tea began over 5,000 years ago. According to the legend, an early emperor of China named Shen Nung passed a decree that all drinking water must be boiled as a hygienic precaution. As the story continues, some of the emperor's servants were boiling water to prepare a drink for the court, when dried leaves of a nearby Tea plant fell into the boiling water. The emperor drank this new beverage and enjoyed it



Camellia sinensis
The Tea Plant



so much that it became the drink of choice in ancient China. Tea has continued to be popular in China. Much of the spread of Tea throughout China came from traveling Buddhist priests. It was from one of the journeys, that Tea made its way into Japan and became the object of an art form with the creation of the “Japanese Tea Ceremony”.

TEA COMES TO AMERICA

For centuries, Tea was grown and used by the people of China and Japan, but it was not until the early 1600's that tea was first discovered by the Europeans. Much of the early use of tea was restricted to wealthy individuals and nobility because of its high price. It was treated as a rare spice with prices being over \$100.00 per pound in the early years of tea in Europe. Like the craze that had swept tea into popularity in China and Japan, the trend continued in Europe with tea becoming a part of the way of life. This was especially true in England where “Afternoon Tea” became a ritual. In the late 1600's, Tea made its way into popularity in the English colonies in America. During the years leading up to the American Revolutionary War, the English imposed many different taxes on the colonists which were resented by the new settlers of America. However, in 1767 when the English imposed the Tea Tax, the colonists were motivated

to action by dressing up as Indians, boarding ships in New England, and throwing hundreds of pounds of tea into the harbor as a protest of their displeasure. It became well known as “The Boston Tea Party”, and it was this act of defiance that ultimately led America towards achieving its independence in the Revolutionary War.

As was the case in China, Japan, and Europe, tea became a very popular beverage in America as well. Some of the earliest attempts to grow Tea in America occurred in the south-east. According to a report from Francis Moore, seeds of *Camellia sinensis* were sent to Savannah, Georgia to be planted in the famous Trust Gardens in 1744. The report goes on to say that the Tea seed did not germinate. According to an 1857 report of the United States Patent Office, Tea plants first came to Georgia in 1772, and by 1805, Tea was growing on Skidaway Island near Savannah. Much of the early attempts to grow Tea in America were unsuccessful due in part to insufficient capital, and also because of a malaria epidemic that hit the Savannah region.

The most successful effort to grow Tea in America happened around the Charleston, South Carolina region. One of the first attempts at growing Tea in Charleston was in 1813 at a nursery owned by Philippe Noisette, but these early attempts to grow Tea in South Carolina did not flourish any better than those in Georgia. In the late 1800's, Pinehurst Tea Plantation and Golden Grove Tea Company both began to grow Tea in the Charleston area, but both had disappeared



Boston Tea Party

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Oak-lined drive to Charleston Tea Plantation



*Bill Hall shows root development in new *C. sinensis* plants*



The Green Giant

by the early 1900's. In 1960, Tea was attempted to be grown once again in Charleston at a Lipton Research facility on Wadmalaw Island. This new attempt utilized many of the original Tea plants that were grown by the Shephard Pinehurst Tea Plantation in nearby Summerville. Later, this facility became better known as the Charleston Tea Plantation.

THE CHARLESTON TEA PLANTATION

To help me understand more about Tea and how it is grown, I visited the Charleston Tea Plantation earlier this year, and had the great pleasure of talking with Mr. William Hall who is one of the partners of this unique Tea growing facility. If you have never been to visit the Charleston Tea Plantation, you must make plans to stop in when you are in the neighborhood. It is a truly fascinating place to see. I have been growing camellias most of my life, and I thought that I knew a lot about Tea. After visiting with and learning from Mr. Hall, I soon realized that there was more to Tea than sweet or un-sweet.



William Hall is a truly unique individual who has a passion for Tea like no one that I have ever met. He is a third-generation Tea Taster who is originally from Canada. Mr. Hall began his career in Tea by first doing an apprenticeship in England where he learned the art of tea tasting. He told me that to become a Tea Taster, you have to taste between 800 and 1,000 cups of tea a day everyday five days a week for four years. This skill allows him to determine whether or not a certain batch of tea was prepared properly. After finishing his apprenticeship, he worked for several of the largest tea companies and tea trading companies in the world. His experience with growing Tea began in Argentina when he arrived there to open an office for one of these companies. Argentina is the largest supplier of tea to America, and during his seven years working with tea in that country, he developed an understanding of how tea was grown efficiently.

He told me that during a trip to America to attend a Tea Convention, he read an article about the history of tea in this country, and that the article went on to say that Tea could never be grown efficiently in America. The article indicated that the cost of labor was too high, and that the elevation was not right for growing Tea. Mr. Hall's experience told him that the article was all wrong. He knew that in Argentina all of the Tea is harvested mechanically, so the cost of labor being higher in America would not factor in if Tea was harvested by mechanical means. Also, from his experience with Tea grown in many different areas of the world, he knew that elevation was not a consideration. After the Tea Convention was over, he flew to Charleston, South Carolina on a business trip. While there, he learned of a very secret research facility that was growing Tea for the Lipton Tea Company. Being intrigued, he was able to arrange a visit where he saw first-

hand efforts at growing Tea in America. He realized that if you combine the best information from both a horticultural side and from a tea tasting side, Tea could be grown profitably in America. In 1987, Mr. Hall purchased the research facility from Lipton, and began what is now known as the Charleston Tea Plantation.

Today, the Charleston Tea Plantation is the only Tea plantation in America, and the Tea produced there is sold under the brand name of American Classic Tea. There are 130 different varieties of Tea that are grown at the Charleston Tea Plantation. All of these clones are direct descendents of earlier Tea-growing efforts from the Shephard operations. Mr. Hall said that in choosing a Tea variety, he is most concerned with that particular variety's drought resistance and time of growing. Varieties that begin growing early in the season and ones that continue to grow late in the season are especially good, since all Tea is harvested from the new growth. All of the plants grown at Charleston Tea Plantation are grown from cuttings on the facility, and then planted in the fields after being grown for a while in small containers to assure uniformity. Mr. Hall told me that Tea, like all camellias, are shallow-rooted plants, so they must have good drainage. In addition to drainage, good moisture retention is also important, so mulching the root system is very helpful.

I found it very interesting to learn what is used at the Charleston Tea Plantation for mulch. No herbicides are used at all in the field, so hand weeding must be done. As the weeds are pulled, these same weeds are used as mulch, and it works very well in helping to retain moisture for the Tea plants. The pH of the soil is also important. According to Mr. Hall, Tea plants prefer a pH of 4.5-5.5. He has started a new system of planting Tea in the fields. Each Tea plant is planted on 18-inch centers in rows with trickle or drip irrigation to maximize watering efficiency. Each row of Tea plantings in the fields is spaced so that their mechanical Tea harvester can straddle the rows and harvest Tea approximately every 18 days, if they have adequate rainfall. In addition to this specially modified Tea harvester, affectionately called the Green Giant, they have another specially modified tractor that can straddle the rows in applying fertilizer. One of the most impressive things that I learned about Tea production at Charleston Tea Plantation is that they do not use any insecticides or fungicides. Tea plants are naturally insect and disease resistant, and the lack of chemicals in a product that is consumed is a reassuring fact.

I learned that Tea is grown in many areas of the world, and that it is the climatic differences that are the primary contributors of different taste in Tea. Even though there are 130 different varieties of Tea grown at Charleston Tea Plantation, it is the climate of where these Tea plants are grown that accounts for their taste, and there is not a significantly noticeable difference in taste between varieties, unless you happen to be a Tea taster like Mr. Hall. Growing Tea is like most agriculture jobs. It is a seven-days-a-week job, and it always requires constant attention to what is happening in the fields. After spending over two hours with Mr. Hall, it was



Left: *Camellia sinensis* - the Tea Plant

apparent that his desire to grow Tea was something more than just an economic effort. It is truly a labor of love that is founded in a passion for the Tea plant.

Visiting with William Hall gave me a new understanding and appreciation for the art and science of growing and making Tea. The Tea that is grown at Charleston Tea Plantation is prepared and processed in their facility which is located on the premises. Anyone who visits the Charleston Tea Plantation can take the tour showing how the process works. It is a very interesting process, and a unique place to visit.

America is also noted for two innovations with tea. In the 1904 World's Fair at St. Louis, tea was being offered on a very hot day, but no one seemed interested in the hot tea. In desperation, someone put ice in the tea, and by accident, a new way of serving tea was born. Today, 85% of the tea consumed in America is iced tea. The interesting fact about this is that America is the only country in the world where iced tea is popular. Another improvement with tea that was developed in America was the invention of the tea bag. This improvement made tea more convenient for many consumers to enjoy.

There are over six billion pounds of tea produced in the world every year. It is the second most consumed beverage in the world after water, and just think that it is made from a camellia. After reviewing the facts about tea and its impact on agriculture around the world, it is very clear that camellias can offer much more than just pretty flowers. The Tea plant is an outstanding landscape plant that blooms in the fall and early winter, and it also offers the possibility of having the gardener make his own tea as well.

For more information on Tea, visit the following sites on the Internet:

- <http://www.bigelowtea.com/act/>;
- http://www.theteahousetimes.com/tea_plantation.htm;
- <http://www.stashtea.com/facts.htm>;
- <http://www.ocha.net/english/world/report/report01.htm>;
- <http://www.geocities.com/lgol27/HistoryTeaUSA.htm>
- <http://www.teausa.com/>