

## The Origins of *Camellia x williamsii* at Caerhays

The history of the camellia in UK horticulture is a rather peculiar story. Camellias enjoyed rising popularity in the 1840s but, largely, only in the grandest country houses with large conservatories as at Chatsworth, Chiswick and Sheffield Park. The perception was that camellias were delicate, tender, plants suitable only for growing under the protection of glass. This was very probably because early forms of *Camellia japonica* from Japan were being imported from much warmer Mediterranean climates in Spain, Portugal and Italy where, again, they were being grown in the courtyards and walled gardens of wealthy nobility and landowners.

The situation in Cornwall in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was different. Ships' captains operating out of Falmouth were commissioned to bring back new plants from overseas by Cornish landowners and industrialists. One of the earliest examples of a collection of *Camellia japonica* varieties can still be found today in decline and over maturity in the walled garden at Scorrier House near Redruth. Here they still grow up against sheltering high stone walls. Tregothnan Estate near Truro also has one of the very earliest collections of *Camellia japonica* dating from the 1820s. It would appear that the plants which you still see today in good order were actually moved (and cut back) to their current location in the arboretum in about 1923.

So camellias were far from being unknown in English gardens, but they had not exactly become popular or widely grown. One has to remember that in its pure specie form *Camellia japonica* has small, often sparse, and fairly unexciting single red flowers. Its dark green foliage made it more of a foliage plant.

From the 1840s, through to 1914, orchid mania and the landowning passion for growing newly imported species of exotic orchids, eclipsed any real interest in camellias. Camellias were static and dull for much of the year, and took up more room in the conservatory or glasshouse. Many different species of orchid could be grown in pots in the space needed for just one camellia.

The first greenhouse at Caerhays was built in the 1880s as an orchid house. Werrington Park near Launceston, which was purchase by JC Williams (JCW) of Caerhays and Burncoose in 1885, had previously been owned by the Duke of Northumberland. It boasted an enormous conservatory attached to the main house and the walled garden had at least three other orchid houses. These glasshouses were to become crucial in germinating and growing on the huge numbers of new rhododendron species, and a multitude of other plants' seeds from many different plant genera which arrived back from China as a result of the plant hunting expeditions by Ernest Wilson and George Forrest between 1902 and 1932. This is however to jump ahead of the story.

The first two camellias to arrive at Caerhays, as evidenced in the garden arrivals record, only appeared in 1897. These were recorded as *Camellia reticulata*, which still just survive today, and should properly have been recorded as *C. reticulata* 'Captain Rawes'. In 1900 twenty-five (unnamed in the records) camellias arrived from Blackmore and one-hundred-and-fifty (also unnamed) from Veitch & Son, Exeter, and Gauntlett Nursery in 1902. A handful more were acquired by 1920. A good many of these elderly plants survive here today both in shade and full sun and many were planted in Old Park and Forty Acres Woods where they currently provide an annual foliage harvest for Covent Garden as they have for decades since 1946. While many of these 175 new arrivals were clearly pure *C. japonica* others, planted along the walls outside the back yard here, were named varieties of *C. japonica*. These have been hard pruned every 20

years or so and are still in rude health. Some are also readily identifiable. The point, as we will see, is that JCW was, unwittingly then, preparing the groundwork for future camellia hybridisation.



*Camellia japonica*



*Camellia japonica* readily sets seeds



My great-grandfather, John Charles Williams (JCW) (1868-1939), started his passion for gardening with daffodil breeding in the 1880s. Spurred on by the Rev Engelhard, another passionate daffodil breeder, he developed literally thousands of new varieties of daffodil. Of these, up to 30 varieties can still be purchased

today and have stood the test of time. The objective was to grow strains of early flowering daffodils from which smaller Cornish farmers could produce new commercial crops at a time of great hardship in the countryside. JCW was therefore quick to realise the potential for a new woodland garden at Caerhays which might result from the speculation about the vast wealth of new plant material which was said to exist in China. George Forrest (1873-1932) undertook seven separate plant hunting expeditions to Yunnan and Szechuan all of which were wholly or partly sponsored or funded by JCW. The two became close friends and the correspondence between them is voluminous as are Forrest's field notes and maps which JCW annotated as the new plants grew and prospered here.

Forrest field notes from his 1917 to 1920 expedition state:

*Collection number 17686*

*This Speciosa Pitardkurmo A1331-A184? Volcanic mountains NW of Tengyueh. Latitude 25° 10' N. Altitude 8,000ft. Evergreen shrub of 6-12ft. Flowers Rose Pink. Open hillside. March 1918.*

Little did anyone know it just then, but the arrival of seed from Camellia "Speciosa" at Caerhays was to herald the 'escape' of the camellia from the conservatory into becoming a common outdoor shrub growing countrywide throughout the UK and, worldwide, in more temperate climates, within less than 50 or so years.

By 1923 Camellia saluenensis (as we now know Speciosa) was large enough to be flowering. The two original plants still survive here today either side of the ladies lavatories at the back of the rear courtyard. One is a much paler form, which normally has a flower or two in late November, and the other is a darker pink, which is normally well out by Christmas. Both have been hard pruned at least twice in their lives and are today looking in need of another 'hat standing' if one is bold enough.



The two original plants of *Camellia saluenensis*



The paler form of *Camellia saluenensis*



The darker form of *Camellia saluenensis*

The perceived view today is that *C. saluenensis* was the seed parent and *C. japonica* the pollen parent of the first crosses with this new species of camellia that had now appeared from China. I cannot however myself quite believe that these two young plants of *C. saluenensis* could have been producing viable seed in such a short time. JCW and his new head gardener, Charles Michael, may, very probably, have made their first crosses with *C. japonica* as the seed parent and the new *C. saluenensis* as the pollen parent.

As far as my father and I were able to discover in the garden records here JCW's only recorded camellia hybridisation work was in 1923. It was his cross number 181 that was to produce the first *x williamsii* camellias as they eventually came to be known. Alongside the two original plants of *C. saluenensis*, and growing all along the walls towards the back yard, is a batch of the very first seedlings of the new crossing of the two species of camellia. These too have been heavily pruned over the years but it is interesting that none of these seedlings are actually named varieties. They first flowered in 1926.

Indeed the large clump of similar camellia *x williamsii* seedlings just outside the front arch on from the lawn are not named either, although it contains a UK Record camellia tree by height, which you can see in the photograph.



The Record unnamed *Camellia x williamsii*

One must assume that Gardener Michael, who retired in 1956, carried on crossing the two species, with or without JCW's approval, in the years immediately after 1923. JCW was an intensely private person with no interest at all in publicity or self-promotion for his hybridisation work. Horticultural journalists did not formally visit Caerhays until 1946/7 and the majority of JCW's numerous rhododendron hybrids only really began to be named by his family successors and horticultural friends in the years just before his death in 1939.

It is clear that the first two named *x williamsii* crosses, 'St Ewe' and 'JC Williams', were only actually named as such in the 1930s when JCW's health was failing. Today these grow as hedges and bold clumps in massed original plantings in the garden, so it must have been obvious to JCW and Gardener Michael that they had indeed produced something unique and new.



Camellia x williamsii 'St Ewe'



Camellia x williamsii 'JC Williams'

So why was this new strain of camellia hybrids so new and unique? Why are what we now refer to as *Camellia x williamsii* varieties of such interest and importance to gardeners today? In a nutshell it is really the perfect example of “hybrid vigour” producing something which is exceptionally better, at least in garden growing terms, than either of its parents. More specifically:

1. *Camellia x williamsii* varieties are entirely hardy and vigorous. They will grow and thrive perfectly happily outside anywhere in the British Isles regardless of frost or cold winters. They still thrive in windy conditions and several varieties make good windbreak hedges. The *C. saluenensis* seed which Forrest collected did come from a high altitude!
2. They flower earlier in the season and for longer than the majority of other *Camellia japonicas*. It is by no means unusual for the Caerhays bred *Camellia x williamsii* varieties (and many others) to start opening their first flowers in December and for them still be producing a fairly decent show in early April. If frost knocks over one set of flowers the next batch is never very far behind. Indeed, after the March 2018 ‘Beast from the East’, this only took two or three days. *Camellia x williamsii* ‘November Pink’ normally lives up to its name but show entries are often still seen in late March.



Camellia 'November Pink'

3. Unlike many *C. japonicas* most *C. x williamsii* varieties tend to drop their flowers to the ground rather than them browning off, and looking unsightly, while remaining on the plant. Indeed the shedding of flowers under early flowering *x williamsii* can produce a novel and interesting feature in the garden.



A carpet of flowers under the hedgerow of *Camellia x williamsii* 'Brigadoon'

4. Today, so many of the more modern camellia varieties which we enjoy growing, have such developed double flowers that many lack anthers and stamens. Seed production, and therefore the ability for us to continue with hybridisation work, is absent. Those *x williamsii* camellias which do still exhibit *C. saluenensis* features, will still produce viable seed, and will therefore enable us, hopefully, to continue to make new crosses with the many other newly introduced Chinese species of camellia. In the UK the development and registration of new camellia varieties (except as natural 'sports') has been noticeably limited in recent decades. Importation of the latest new camellia varieties from California or Australia has also been prohibited for some time.

Attached at the end of this article is a list of the *x williamsii* camellias bred and raised at Caerhays and Burncoose over the last 100 years. In today's terms, and despite all their other attributes, the predominantly single flowered forms may well be considered a bit inferior, at least in terms of the size and 'blowsiness' of individual flowers. However Gardener Michael and his successors clearly did not stop repeating and varying the use of *C. saluenensis* as a seed parent for subsequent crosses whatever JCW may have thought.

*Camellia japonica* 'Lady Clare' arrived at Caerhays from Reuthe's nurseries in 1909. This was crossed with *C. saluenensis* to produce the first double flowered *x williamsii* varieties which were named 'Caerhays' and 'George Blandford'. *C. 'Cornish Snow'* was a Caerhays cross between *C. cuspidata* and *C. saluenensis* in around 1930. Hillier's produced the similar pink flowered 'Winton' from the same cross done in reverse.



Camellia x williamsii 'Caerhays'



Camellia x williamsii 'George Blandford'

While many of these new Caerhays x williamsii camellias were only being put up for registration, awards and formal recognition by the RHS, in the late 1940s through to the early 1960s, the x williamsii 'genie' was firmly out of the bottle just as the camellia had firmly jumped out of the glasshouse.

JCW's gardening friends made frequent and recorded visits to Caerhays from Exbury, Leonardslee, Bodnant, Borde Hill as well as from other developing Cornish gardens and, particularly, Lanarth. They would have been well aware of what JCW had created and obviously wanted to try similar crosses for themselves, and be more adventurous, especially with new double flowered varieties.

Probably the most famous and widely grown x williamsii hybrid of all time is Camellia 'Donation'. It has stood the test of time for its hardiness and floriferousness. It was raised at Borde Hill from *C. saluenensis* x *C. japonica* 'Donkelaeri' by Col Stephenson-Clarke in 1941 but only received an RHS First Class Certificate in 1978. The original plant actually died at Borde Hill, but Trewithen Gardens, in Cornwall, had been gifted a small plant and this is in fact the parent of all 'Donations'.



© Burncoose Nurseries

Camellia x williamsii 'Donation'

One wonders why JCW did not cross *C. saluenensis* with *C. japonica* 'Adolphe Audusson' which arrived at Caerhays in 1932 from Hillier's nurseries. This was however left to Gillian Carlyon who developed many exciting new double flowered x *williamsii* at Tregrehan Garden, near St Austell, in the 1960s and 1970s. 'E T R Carlyon', 'China Clay' and 'Tregrehan' are merely a few of the best examples.

Camellia hybridisation work of this sort was by no means restricted to the UK. *Camellia* x *williamsii* crosses were soon being made worldwide wherever conditions were suitable for growing camellias. Indeed, in warmer countries, camellias were often producing far more seed than in the UK. Professor Waterhouse imported a plant of *C. saluenensis* from an English nursery to Australia in 1938. It died quite quickly in 1945, but not before seeding profusely. Waterhouse expected the self-sown seedlings which he dug up and raised to be the true species but, in fact, they developed into what were named 'Margaret Waterhouse' and 'E G Waterhouse'. The professor visited Caerhays in extreme old age in 1975 and all the Caerhays x *williamsii* varieties had to be cut and displayed for his comments. Not all were favourable! The cross pollination with the many named *C. japonica* in his garden, which allowed him to introduce a multitude of pollen parents to *C. saluenensis*, would probably have been impossible in our climate. Our *C. saluenensis* seedlings, which we still regularly raise here from the two original plants, are virtually all identical to the parents despite the proximity of other japonicas and, also, original forms of *sasanqua*, which sometimes overlap in their flowering time with their immediate *saluenensis* neighbours.

The Jury family were making similar progress with x *williamsii* hybridisation in the 1960s in New Zealand since they too, in a warmer climate, had access to more viable pollen and seed set. Their enduring successes are still amongst the bestsellers from the Burncoose Nurseries catalogue and, now, fully mature in the gardens here. These include *C.* 'Debbie' (*C. saluenensis* x *C. japonica* 'Debutante') and *C.* 'Anticipation' (*C. saluenensis* x *C. japonica* 'Leviathan') which are exceptional plants that JCW would have greatly admired.

*Camellia* x *williamsii* 'Brigadoon' might well get my vote as my favourite semi-double flowered x *williamsii* variety. This was bred originally in California by Armstrong nurseries. Its upright habit and floriferousness is rather reminiscent of 'St Ewe' as is its use at Caerhays as a vigorous tall growing windbreak.



Camellia x williamsii 'Brigadoon' as a hedge

The great enduring joke about Camellia x williamsii, and Cross 181, is that JCW would have been absolutely horrified today if he knew that a whole new worldwide strain of many thousands of camellia varieties had actually been named after him as a result of his work. A strange but enduring legacy which brought all camellias into all of our gardens instead of just being grown by a very few under glass.

CHW

April 2020

### **Camellia x williamsii hybrids bred and raised at Caerhays and Burncoose**

#### **'Beatrice Michael'**

saluenensis x japonica



Introduced 1954.

AM 1980 when exhibited by Treseder's nurseries.

Named after the wife of the head gardener at Caerhays 1922 to 1956.

**'Burncoose'**

x williamsii



Introduced in 1985 as a chance seedling from  
Caerhays growing at Burncoose.  
Very dense and compact habit.

**'Burncoose Apple Blossom'**

x williamsii



Introduced in 1986 .  
Bred by Arnold Dance, head gardener at  
Burncoose 1958 to 1998.

**'Caerhays'**

saluenensis x japonica 'Lady Clare'



Introduced 1958.  
AM 1969.

**'Carolyn Williams'**

x williamsii

Introduced 1970s.  
Named after a family cousin.



**‘Charles Michael’**  
saluenensis x japonica

Introduced 1951.  
AM 1987.  
Named after the head gardener at Caerhays  
1922 to 1957.



**‘Citation’**  
x williamsii

Probably of Caerhays origin arriving at  
Bodnant in 1933 under the name ‘Williamsii  
semi-double’.  
AM 1960.



**‘George Blandford’**  
saluenensis x japonica ‘Lady Clare’

Introduced 1962.  
AM 1965 & 1974 AGM 2002.  
Named after a gamekeeper and gardener at  
Caerhays who worked on the estate for over 70  
years.



**‘J.C. Williams’**  
japonica x saluenensis

Introduced 1940.  
FCC 1942 AGM 2002.  
The first x williamsii variety bred in 1923.



**‘John Pickthorn’**  
x williamsii

Introduced 1962.  
Named after a godson of F J Williams.



**‘Mary Christian’**  
saluenensis x japonica

Introduced 1942.  
AM 1942 FCC 1977 AGM 2002.  
Named after J.C.Williams' wife. The variegated leaved form originating from a sport at Hillier’s Nurseries is known as ‘Golden Spangles’.



**‘Mary Jobson’**  
saluenensis x japonica

Introduced 1962 .  
Named after a niece of F J Williams.  
One of the very few scented varieties of x williamsii.



**'Mary Larcom'**

x williamsii

Introduced 1962.

AM 1974.

Named after the daughter of a university friend of F J Williams.



**'Monica Dance'**

x williamsii

Introduced 1984.

Curious striped petalling.

Bred by Arnold Dance, head gardener at Burncoose, and named after his wife.



**'Muskoka'**

x williamsii

Introduced 1970s.

AGM 2002.

Named after a town in northern Canada.



**'New Venture'**

Introduced 1985.

saluenensis x japonica 'Gauntlettii'



Bred by Philip Tregunna, head gardener at Caerhays until 1997, to celebrate the opening of Burncoose Nurseries in 1987.

**'November Pink'**

saluenensis x japonica



Introduced 1950

AM 1950.

Nearly always out by the first week of November. Trailing habit.

**'Philippa Forward'**

x williamsii



Introduced 1962.

Named after a godchild of F J Williams.

**'Rosemary Williams'**

x williamsii



Introduced in 1961.

Named after a close family cousin.

**'St Ewe'**

japonica x saluenensis

Introduced 1940.

AM 1947 FCC 1975 AGM 2002.

Named after a nearby village to Caerhays. The first x williamsii variety bred in 1923.



**'St Michael'**  
saluenensis x japonica



**F J Williams cross – unnamed**



Introduced 1970s.

AM 1987.

Named after the church of St Michael  
Caerhays.

Unregistered as yet.