

# *Camellia reticulata* and its hybrids

## Questions and Answers

By Neil Mitchell

Neil Mitchell, HSOC member and author, is well known for his extensive knowledge of camellias, amply demonstrated in his chapter (with co-author Brian Usback) on 'Camellias, rhododendrons and azaleas' in 'The Canberra Gardener' (10th edition) and his outstanding successes at camellia shows. [Editor]



'Leonard Messel'  
at Bundanoon

We have just seen the close of the principal show season – at least as far as camellias are concerned. This is not to say that the flowering season is quite over but it will cease with the new spring growth at some time in October. The Spring Bulb and Camellia Show is notable for its fine offerings of camellias and the large flowered *reticulata* cultivars always attract attention. In this article, I ask myself some questions (a couple of which are often asked at shows) and answer them, I hope to the reader's satisfaction. The only assumption that I have made is that you have access to – and will read – the relevant chapter in 'The Canberra Gardener'.

**Q.1.** Why can't I buy the fantastic-looking camellia cultivars (i.e. distinct, named varieties) that I see benched at the show? I can't ever find them at my local nursery!

**A.1.** The tough questions should come first. 'The Canberra Gardener' offers a long list to which is added ... "The choice from garden centres is usually limited to just a few that are easily propagated. To acquire more unusual varieties, you will need to visit a specialist nursery".

You will likely have found now and again – usually as cutting grown plants i.e. at cheap prices, 'Dream Girl', 'Flower Girl', 'Show Girl', 'California Dawn' and 'California Sunset' – these are all half *Camellia sasanqua* in their breeding and are easily propagated. They are not show bench material as they

are towards the end of their flowering season by September, i.e. they are by then past their best.

You will also have found at many garden centres 'Dr Clifford Parks' which is one of the best, is half *Camellia japonica* by breeding and you would have seen it on our show bench. The same could be said for 'Harold L. Paige' in deep red, 'LASCA Beauty' in mid pink and 'Lila Naff' in soft pink. 'Leonard Messel' is a rosy pink hybrid that involves a *Camellia x williamsii* as one parent and it eventually produces medium to large blooms. Only 'Dr Clifford Parks' is commonly seen.

**Q.2.** What about varieties that are hard to propagate?

**A.2.** These are produced as grafted plants, meaning that a wholesaler has to sacrifice a perfectly good plant that becomes the understock (e.g. *Camellia hiemalis* 'Kanjiro') and graft a small piece of the desired *Camellia reticulata* on top, then wait 2 years to get a saleable plant. A realistic retail price would be \$40 to \$50. Over the years I have seen local garden centres like 'The Garden' and 'Willow Park' try to sell these plants to the public, the members of



Above left: 'Harold L Paige' at Exeter



'Zipao' at Merry Garth, Mount Wilson



'Damanao' at Bundanoon



'Captain Rawes' at Merry Garth, Mount Wilson

which cannot seem to chase the death adders out of their pockets. So, if you want to have more choice, pay for it. Some varieties that will only be available as grafted plants include all of the classic Yunnan garden forms like 'Dataohong' (syn. 'Crimson Robe'), 'Zipao' (syn. 'Purple Gown'), 'Damanao' (syn. 'Cornelian'), 'Captain Rawes' and 'Buddha'. If you see other varieties that are cutting grown, buy them. By way of example, Mr Bill Parker of Camellias-R-Us has started to propagate 'Miss Rebecca', a seedling of 'Zipao'. Buy it just to encourage him.

**Q.3.** Why aren't my flowers of 'Dr Clifford Parks' as good as those on the show benches?

**A.3.** There are a few reasons and some of them are self-correcting with time. First, remember to follow the advice in 'The Canberra Gardener'. Don't plant against huge trees that will out-compete them. Second, removing half the buds (at random, not just the largest or the smallest) is a trick employed by exhibitors to force larger flowers from those buds that remain. This can be done in early autumn, once you've trained your eye to tell the difference between a flower bud and a growth bud, but early winter is not too late. Third, remember to water as the flowers open (flowers are largely made of water). Fourth, remember that very actively growing plants can be mean with their flowers for a few years and that *Camellia reticulata* and its hybrids take about 7 to 10 years to produce full-sized flowers, especially if cutting grown. Plants that are well grown in potting mix seem to be better in this respect for the first few years. Also, if your plant of 'Dr Clifford Parks' is a grafted plant it will be of faster growth, at least at first.

**Q.4.** What's new in reticulatas?

**A.4.** Well, forget imports of new foreign-bred plants. *Camellia* flower blight is now present in most foreign countries and – for good quarantine reasons – imports of plant material are effectively banned. Seeds (which don't come true) can be imported. That means we can recycle older varieties that have been out of the trade or raise new ones locally in Australia. You can cross garden forms and get acceptable flowers (see the photo of a seedling of 'Milo Rowell').

Some of the frontiers of *Camellia reticulata* breeding include the following:

- ◆ better plants in the sense that they are appealing, but easily grown from cuttings. An example is 'Stirling Macoboy' which is from a cross between *C. reticulata* 'LASCA Beauty' x *japonica* and *C. sasanqua* x *reticulata* 'Dream Girl' performed by Bob Cherry of Paradise Plants Nursery;
- ◆ in China, 'Dr Clifford Parks' has been crossed with the interesting and unusual species *Camellia azalea* to produce a summer flowering (as well as all year round) informal double sun-hardy camellia;
- ◆ we don't have a yellow or sunset coloured *reticulata* hybrid but Australian breeders (the late Dr Bob Withers, the very much alive Bob Cherry included) have produced some creamy coloured seedlings. Raraflora does have 'Kogane Yuri', a small beginning in this field;
- ◆ we don't have a fragrant *reticulata* hybrid as yet. Why not put the pollen of 'High Fragrance' onto one of the *sasanqua-reticulata* crosses or 'LASCA Beauty' as mentioned in Answer 1?
- ◆ some large autumn blooming plants that look like 'Dr Clifford Parks' would be nice. A cross as in the second point above might achieve that.

**Q.5.** Where can I buy plants of *Camellia reticulata*?

**A.5.** Try locally. Then consider taking a day trip to Wodonga (Wodonga Plant Farm often stocks hybrid *reticulata* – telephone first), look at internet sites (Camellias-R-Us, Raraflora) and consider a day trip to collect the plants (in Sydney and Berry respectively) and see if other camellia nurseries are open in Sydney when you are travelling.



Right: Seedling of 'Milo Rowell'