

## The Macarthur Camellia Legacy

### A talk by Stephen Utick

Good afternoon Ladies and Gentlemen, and welcome to this talk on the William Macarthur Camellia Legacy.

In so doing I acknowledge the elders past and present and the original custodians of the land, and specially acknowledge and thank the present custodians, John and Edwina Macarthur-Stanham who have kindly allowed this presentation today.

I also acknowledge the research of the late Professor Richard Clough, around which much of the early garden history has been sourced.

I give this presentation in my capacity as the first elected Chair of the International Camellia Society's Committee for the Conservation of Historic Camellias.

Across the world, and not only in the traditional camellia homelands of China and Japan, but in many European countries, Britain, the United States, New Zealand, the Azores and perhaps even in Brazil, camellias planted in the nineteenth century have become centenarian sentinels in gardens and landscapes.

These camellias were planted during the heyday of the Victorian era, during which they were regarded as prized garden possessions.

The same was true for the South-Eastern Australian colonies.

Now camellias originally planted in colonial properties and public gardens during the nineteenth century or early Federation era turn over 100 years old.

Perhaps one of the most common of these is a hardy medium-sized informal double *Camellia japonica*, featuring bloom cream-white with carmine streaks, but also famed for its many sports due to genetic instability.

It is called 'Aspasia Macarthur', and so perpetuates the name 'Macarthur' in the Australian gardening world.

It has become one of the most enduring, as well as the first significant, Australian raised camellia.

It was developed by William Macarthur (1800-1882), Sir William from 1855, the youngest son of John and Elizabeth Macarthur, who developed and selected it here at Camden Park estate during the 1840s.

William had originally named it as 'Aspasia', after the most famous woman of fifth century Athens, a consort to the statesman Pericles, and the cultivar was published in the *Botanical Society of New South Wales Report* of 1848.

William's love of classical history and mythology is revealed by his naming of camellia cultivars – his 'Cassandra' was named after the daughter of King Priam of Troy and his 'Dido' was named the first queen of Carthage. Others are named after characters from Shakespeare, for example – Perdita from *A Winter's Tale*, and Miranda from *The Tempest*.

Invariably the camellia cultivars were named after women.

Unbeknown to William, an Italian camellia grower by the name of Santarelli had already named a carmine pink camellia 'Aspasia', which had already appeared in European catalogues as early as 1840-4.

Over a century later, in 1952, Professor E. G. Waterhouse, then a doyen of camellia culture, suggested that the Australian Aspasia be known as 'Aspasia Macarthur', and from then on the Macarthur name link was introduced.

In the botanical world, Macarthur's name is also commemorated in the genus *Macarthuria* Hugel ex Endl., the fern species: *Cyathea macarthurii* F.Muell. and the palm species *Ptychosperma macarthurii*.

The story of Aspasia Macarthur provides us with an opening glimpse into the profound camellia legacy of William Macarthur.

That legacy includes both the establishment of a nursery supply of camellias through the Australian colonies, and the development of the first Australian camellia cultivars.

### **Macarthur in the early context of colonial camellia introduction**

There was an early misconception among many that William Macarthur was the first to introduce camellias into New South Wales.

William had been active in nursery development and plantings at Camden Park Estate as early as 1817. From then on he would gain a reputation as a horticulturalist and vigneron, eventually becoming a member of the Legislative Council. He remained a bachelor.

In 1831, he received a shipment of camellias via the Sovereign, including 'Rubra', 'Welbankiana', 'Alba Plena', 'Incarната', 'Anemoniflora' and 'Myrtifolia'.

However camellias had already been introduced to New South Wales by then.

The first confirmed plantings of camellia in New South Wales date back to 1823, in the Royal Botanic Gardens under the supervision of superintendent Charles Fraser. One of these, *Camellia japonica* 'Rubra Plena', a double red, had been a gift of Lady Brisbane, the wife of the Governor. The Horticultural Society of London also donated 'Variegata' to the Botanic Gardens in 1824.

Further, in 1825, Colonial Secretary Alexander Macleay brought with him a collection of camellias purchased from Loddiges Nursery in Hackney London, which he subsequently planted in his 55 acre Double Bay garden.

At the time William Macarthur commenced the camellia side of his nursery enterprise, camellias were already seen by the colonial establishment as valuable garden items.

It is likely for example that camellias first planted in New Zealand in Waitangi in 1833 by British Resident James Busby were sourced from Macarthur's collection.

In 1833, two significant developments would have aided William in his nursery pursuits.

First, William and James Macarthur were assigned the services of convict gardener Edmund Blake here at Camden Park.

Secondly, Wardian Cases were successfully used to ship nursery plants from England to Sydney (originally Loddiges).

Later William was given control of the Camden Park Nursery, which from then on became a major supplier of introduced and locally-raised nursery stock cultivars including of course camellias, to all parts of NSW and New Zealand.

The Macarthurs made a number of importations of camellias from Europe, with William issuing printed lists of these in 1843, 1845, 1850 and 1857.

From this imported stock, William subsequently raised his own new varieties from seed, propagating both these and the imported varieties.

### **First significant supplier of camellias in the Australian colonies**

From that beginning, William Macarthur would become the first major supplier of camellias throughout the Australian colonies, although other suppliers would soon commence operations.

Among these others were the Shepherd Family's Darling Nursery in Darlington, Michael Guilfoyle's Exotic Nursery in Double Bay, and Silas Sheather's Camellia Grove Nursery near Parramatta (the latter situated on John Macarthur's land).

Two important agents for Macarthur's camellia stock were John Bailey and Co of Adelaide, and J. J. Rule's nursery in Richmond Melbourne.

Bailey and Co advertised themselves as agents for William Macarthur as early as 1852.

In 1862, J. J. Rule produced the first catalogue of camellias in the then new state of Victoria, listing 82 cultivars of camellia, about a third of which were Camden Park seedlings.

### **The Camden Park Seedlings and Macarthur's remaining cultivars.**

I will now turn to these seedlings, a list of which was compiled around 1852, and which remains in the Mitchell Library.

That list includes the names of 69 seedlings, over the period 1850-52, of which only 21 were subsequently recorded in sales books.

Of these 21 released cultivars, only six can now be placed in gardens: 'Aspasia Macarthur', 'Cassandra', 'Dido', 'Perdita', 'Isabel' and 'Mariana'. All of these except 'Aspasia Macarthur' and 'Mariana' are rare, and 'Dido', 'Perdita' and 'Isabel' are very rare.

The previous Camellia Ark project released some 'Cassandra' a few years ago, and Camellia Ark Australia has collected cuttings of 'Dido' and 'Mariana' last summer.

You can read more about 'Cassandra', a large handsome scarlet red crimson anemone form camellia, in our latest edition of the *Discovery Journal*.

And this year, with the assistance of CamelliasRUs, we have promoted and circulated some 'Isabel', to which I will return at the end of this presentation.

I should mention one other of the 21 Macarthur releases, a large white camellia 'Leila' (1852) which was apparently re-discovered here at Camden Park by the late Walter Hazlewood, the Sydney nurseryman, during the 1940s. It was sent to the USA where it became known as 'Leila Australia' but has practically disappeared here. I do know of one possible specimen located at Rookwood Cemetery if still alive.

In 1945, Hazlewood also found here a labelled plant of 'Anna M. Page', a seedling of *Chanderii* of which I know at least one specimen that remains.

For most gardeners however, William Macarthur's camellia legacy is the 'Aspasia Macarthur' with its many sports.

Without 'Aspasia Macarthur', we never would have come to enjoy such wonderful cultivars as 'Lady Loch', 'Margaret Davis', 'Can', 'Strawberry Blonde', 'Otahuhu Beauty', 'Jean Clere', 'Just Sue' and the (now rare) 'Camden Park', all sports from the 'Aspasia Macarthur' strain.

So the modern Australian camellia lover has much to thank Sir William for.

### **Isabel (Isabella)**

There is some anecdotal evidence that he did not feel that his work was fully appreciated towards the end of his life.

In the 1870 edition of the Horticultural Magazine and Gardeners' Calendar, on page 112, it was recorded that:

"The hybridisation of flowers is one of Sir William Macarthur's chief hobbies, and the results stamp him as a master-hand in the art. Sir William naively remarked that the raiser of seedlings has no honour in this Colony. He informed us that the well-known 'Isabella' (or 'Isabel') was a Camden Park seedling, together with a host of others to be found in our nurserymen's catalogues."

Today, 'Isabel' of 1857 is not so well known; in fact it has practically disappeared.

From that perspective, I wish to publicly acknowledge and thank Christine and David Ross of the Horticultural Society of Canberra for making available cuttings to me, and for Bill Parker of CamelliasRUs for successfully propagating them.

Sir William's description of it is "Pure white, smallish size, perfectly double and regular to centre, petals well shaped, moderate substance, makes small buds of better shape than old double white". It is a late flowering cultivar.

'Isabel' began to circulate through colonial nurseries during the 1860s, appearing in John Baptist's Sydney nursery list of 1861, and in Michael Guilfoyle's and J. J. Rule's catalogues of 1866.

Now it is fitting, given that commentary of 1870, that 'Isabel' returns to Camden Park in honour of the camellia legacy of Sir William Macarthur.

Please join us at 3.00pm after this meeting for the ceremonial planting in the garden.

Thank for your interest this afternoon and if time permits I can take a few questions.

17 September 2017