



# GARDEN OF A THOUSAND CAMELLIAS

BY  
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**N**O : *The Garden of A Thousand Camellias* is not another example of that enchanting Chinese fantasy which has already given us *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness* and *Tea House of the August Moon*. The Quinta do Palheiro, eighteen hundred feet up on the afforested eastern slopes of the island of Madeira, above the exquisite Bay of Funchal, really is a garden of a thousand camellia trees. Indeed there are probably many more : ranging from young slips just rooting, and with incredible speed, in the rich entirely lime-free soil, to great trees, whole avenues of them, of astonishing girth and age, some of them a hundred and fifty years old.

Madeira, four hundred miles west of the coast of Morocco and on about the same latitude as Casablanca, is blessed not only with this highly fertile lime-free soil, which accounts for the phenomenon of the camellias, but also with the sort of paradisaical climate of which we northern gardeners can only fondly dream. Frost is never known ; winter rains fall in a temperature that hardly varies between forty-five and sixty degrees ; the heat of summer never goes much beyond eighty degrees.

In these blessed conditions a whole range of sub-tropical fruit and flowers and shrubs and trees flourishes with such splendid abundance that the island is a positive botanical Garden of Eden. At sea level, in winter and early spring, hibiscus and scarlet poinsettias flourish side by side with roses, salvias, gladioli, clivias, geraniums, freesias and a wide range of begonia species that in some cases rise like hedges of pink foam. That most beautiful of climbers, *Bignonia Venusta*, sometimes called Golden Rain, spreads its glorious orange honeysuckle fingers

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over every wall and fence, accompanied occasionally by the less common but almost equally lovely *Thunbergia grandiflora*, with its soft parma-violet blossoms that look like climbing gloxinias. At this time custard apples, avocado pears, oranges, lemons and papayas are ripening everywhere between the banana plantations. And though neither wistarias nor jacarandas are yet in bloom and frangipanis are completely bare of leaves various other exotics are in their full glory. *Spathodea Campanulata*, with its flaming scarlet claws, burns against the sky with an absolutely regal splendour. The too little known *Brunfelsia calycina* (you can see it in bloom in January and February in the temperate house at Kew) with its soft crinkled flowers that look as if cut out of some deep purple ecclesiastical vestment burns too against its handsome leaves like the fine aristocrat it is. It first came eastward from the rain-forests of Brazil and used to be called, and indeed in Madeira

still is, *Franciscea calycina*, so named for some reason after the Emperor Franz Josef.

All these things—and they are only a fraction of what the mild winter coastal fringe has to offer—are wonderful ; but eighteen hundred feet up, at the Quinta do Palheiro, there is another world, though an equally beautiful one. Here, in this garden of over thirty acres, conditions are inevitably cooler ; there are winter days of much mist and rain that cause the forest trees to sprout grey foggy lichens. Apple trees and plum trees are still as bare as in an English January. Only an occasional blue head of flowers rises from the miles—yes, indeed, miles—of roadside agapanthus and there are none at all on that other splendid lily, *Crinum Powellii*, which in full summer will be full of stately pink bells.

The Quinta do Palheiro itself, a biggish eighty-year-old house, stands not far from its enchanting little baroque chapel of São João, in a wide courtyard of embedded seashore pebbles. A positive giant of a tulip tree arches over one end, out-topped only by numbers of great specimen conifers. Beyond the courtyard the garden starts to fall away in a series of terraces linked by steps and interspersed by elongated beds and pools and pergolas of clematis and camellias to where, eventually, it dissolves into woodland and a great avenue of plane trees, no less than a hundred of them on each side, where the original lord of the estate, an old count, a rather gay ladies' man, who is reputed to have held gay parties in a strange little folly that now stands ruined in the woods, exercised his many carriage horses.

But though in late winter the great variety of camellias are at their magnificent best and the equally huge magnolias no less so, and though the magenta carpet of oxalis under the big tulip tree is as vivid as spilt wine it is curiously enough something outside the garden itself that first really dazzles the eye. Even the splendour of *Bignonia Venusta* is, I think, outmatched by the golden glory of the woodland's towering mimosas, forty or fifty feet high.

Back in the garden the cool torches of magnolias are even further outmatched, or nearly so, by a less common relative, *Michelia Doltsopa*, a shrub which might well have been named, I feel, after some exotic royal mistress of the old Austrian Empire. The tree, indeed, inspires exactly that sort of vision : its exquisite floppy flowers, pure silky white, like magnolias too lazy to lift their heads, carry a scent more glorious than jasmine. It is the richest of creatures but is itself very nearly outmatched by another beauty of comparable size—i.e. about six or eight feet high—growing not far away : *Tibouchina semidecandra*, formerly *Lasiandra macranthum*, its pale hairy green leaves looking not at all unlike segments of melon peel and its velvet purple flowers as royal as those of the *Brunfelsia*.

It is pertinent to remark here that the mere possession of a superb climate, a soil of generous fertility and a glorious situation is not of itself enough to create a garden, still less an exceptional garden. Much more is needed ; a garden is, or should be, the reflection of its owner's nature, knowledge and character. What it needs most, perhaps, is the presence of affectionate, not to say passionate, hands. In the case of the Quinta do Palheiro the knowledge provided is ample and indeed adventurous and the affection boundless to a point of being almost fanatical. The result is that its owners, Mildred and Graham Blandy, have created a garden which is not only exceedingly beautiful in itself and a botanical treasure house rich in unusual species from all over the world but one which exudes the kind of endearing atmosphere that comes only from deep devotion.

It is true that gardening, and especially the business of propagation, is relatively easy on this amazingly fertile soil. Cuttings take root in no time at all and seedlings, even of trees, grow with breathless rapidity. For example the beautiful Silver Tree from Table Mountain, *Leucadendron argenteum*, reaches a height of three feet in one year from seed and more than doubles this in its second year. An extremely rare treasure, a pink shrub campanula, *Campanula Vidallii*, looks woody and gnarled enough to be one of the garden's oldest inhabitants but in reality is a mere infant, two years old from seed collected on the volcanic foreshore of the island of Corvo, one of the Azores group. This extremely beautiful creature, with its pendant waxy bell-shaped flowers of warm pink forming a large candelabra in summer, does magnificently at Palheiro.

All gardeners, of course, are faced with problem plants which for one reason or another—I often think from sheer cussedness—simply will not grow for them at all ; and this is true of Palheiro. Roses are not really very successful, primarily because they get no adequate period of rest, though one at least is a pure delight in winter : a fine single white saucer of flower, very like a smaller *Mermaid*, that appears to have come originally from China by way of the Azores, where it was first taken by tea-planters. This is probably at least as hardy, in Britain, as *Rosa Banksiae*, which also revels in Madeira's balminess. Certain other temperate

shrubs, notably the forsythias, are also not a success, again because they get no period of winter rest ; nor do gentians, paeonies, lilies of the valley and lupins succeed, though parma violets, freesias and primulas flourish with the prodigality of buttercups, as do arum lilies, growing wild, as they should do, the real lilies of the field.

Side by side with these familiar treasures grow a vast range of rarities from Africa, Western Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere : spider lilies, Nile lilies, ginger lilies, pineapple lilies, Abyssinian lilies ; the tree dahlia, *Dahlia imperialis*, the lobster claw, *Clianthus puniceus*, the Australian Waratah, *Telopea speciosissima* and the various Australian Kangaroo Paws ; strelitzias, gardenias, nerinas, daturas—their handsome hanging lamps of pink, white, yellow and orange positively light up the late winter air—and among many climbers that most lovely wanderer, *Allamanda cathartica*, which I first saw spreading its waxy golden bells over every fence and wall in Tahiti. Orchids flourish, outside, as easily as gladioli, or at least cymbidiums do. Other orchids such as dendrobiums, cattleyas, coelogynes and sobralias must be grown under glass.

A great number of these things have been raised from seed and this is also the case with the latest and perhaps most notable adventure at Palheiro : the great family of South African proteas. No less than a hundred species of these strange and fascinating creatures, whose flowers look something like a cross between a globe artichoke and a sea anemone, are native to Cape Province, though many of them are already becoming rare. Now thirty species are firmly established at Palheiro, where they appear to revel in the winter rains. This, I think, is rather curious, since they look—from a distance at any rate—very like giant everlasting flowers thriving on aridity. They range in colour from pale green to red, with intermediate tones of cream, pink, yellow and a sort of steely mauve, many of them with black tips. Each year new colonies of seedlings are being planted—in spite of their love of rain they do best in a sloping situation—and these too grow with great rapidity, so that it may well turn out that what South Africa is losing Palheiro is helping to save.

It is, however, not only the flora of other parts of the world that inspire such enthusiasm at Palheiro. Madeira has an interesting and varied flora of its own and it is part of Mrs. Blandy's purpose to preserve this too. *Cedronella Canariensis*, the Balm of Gilead, *Clethra arborea*, the Lily of the Valley Tree, *Persea indica*, the Madeira mahogany, several species of orchis and heaths : these are only a few of the indigenous things that are now joined by vast numbers of exciting plants from outside the island, constantly making the rich paradise of the thousand camellias even richer.

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