

Beauty in Bloom: Camellias in the Goto Islands

Camellia flowers are a symbol of the Goto Islands, where they are loved for their beauty and utility. These hardy plants, which are resistant to salty sea winds, have long been planted as windbreaks for homes and farms. Their seeds have been processed for oil in the islands for roughly 4,000 years. Their wood and leaves are still used for firewood and tea, respectively.

Camellia japonica, or the common camellia, is the predominant variety of camellia found on the islands. Fukue has a unique local subspecies as well, called the “Tamanoura camellia” after the city where it was discovered in 1947. This variety is recognizable by its white-rimmed petals. Altogether, about 270 different varieties can be found on the island, growing in the wild and in cultivation.

Camellia Oil

The production of camellia oil on Fukue is a process nearly everyone takes part in. While oil refineries cultivate their own camellia fields for harvest, they also use seeds gathered by local residents. People collect seeds from the trees on their property each autumn and sell them to refineries by the kilogram.

At the refineries, the sun-dried seeds are crushed and pressed to extract oil. Then the oil is cold filtered by passing it through *washi* paper containing activated charcoal, a traditional method for producing pure, high-quality oil.

Both historically and today, camellia oil has had two main uses: culinary and cosmetic. Its relatively high smoke point of 210–250 degrees Celsius makes it suitable for frying and as a base oil in marinades and dressings. It is also a healthy choice, surpassing even olive oil in its levels of vitamin E and oleic acid, an unsaturated fatty acid shown to reduce LDL cholesterol. Camellia oil is a key component of Fukue’s most famous dish, Goto udon. Oil is applied to the noodles as they are hand-stretched, which helps them maintain their firm texture.

Camellia oil has long been used in raw form as a moisturizer for skin and hair. Indeed, it was among the tributary items sent to Tang dynasty emperors on the seventh- and eighth-century envoy ships that departed the Goto Islands for China. Today, it is added to a vast array of soaps, creams, and other beauty products as well, and much of the islands’ oil is sold to high-end cosmetics makers. Modern research suggests the nutrients and fatty acids in camellia oil have anti-inflammatory agents and are effective in retaining moisture and preventing signs of aging.

Camellia Windbreaks

Strong sea winds carrying corrosive salt spray inland can destroy crops and wear down structures, so windbreaks are an essential feature of the Fukue landscape. Japanese camellias, with their supple trunks, evergreen leaves, and salt tolerance, make a resilient natural barrier.

One particularly impressive example of such a windbreak can be found in Miiraku, where windy conditions are common throughout the year. It is called the Camellia Tunnel. As the name suggests, twin rows of camellia trees have grown together over a path, forming a green tunnel. It follows a roughly circular route about a kilometer long around one of the area’s unique round fields called *maruhata*. These camellias were reportedly planted about 200 years ago by Christian settlers who came to the area to escape persecution in Kyushu. One of the oldest and largest trees in the tunnel has since been named the Camellia of the Holy Mother.

Camellias in Christian Iconography

In European religious traditions, one of the flowers most associated with the Virgin Mary is the rose. In Japan, however, it is sometimes a camellia. For example, Kyoto University has a seventeenth-century painting by an unknown Japanese artist that shows key events from Mary’s life, and in a central panel she holds the infant Jesus in her right arm and, in her left, what appears to be a white camellia. In the Christian churches of Fukue, camellias make frequent appearances in decoration and iconography. But while camellias actually have five petals, in this religious context they are often depicted with four, supposedly to represent the arms of the cross.