

Tree of the Month, February 2017: Japanese camellia (*Camellia japonica* ‘Lady Mackinnon’)

Camellia japonica ‘Lady Mackinnon’ is a prolific, late-winter bloomer with semi-double red flowers with white blotches – the perfect colour scheme for Valentine’s Day! It has glossy deep green, serrated evergreen leaves, which contrast with its bright red flowers. Like other Japanese camellias, this cultivar can vary in size from a 2-meter shrub to a 6-meter tree, and can live to 400 years old.

Japanese camellias are native to China, Taiwan, South Korea and southern Japan. They have been cultivated in China since at least the 11th Century and thousands of cultivars have been developed. The flowers of Japanese camellia cultivars can be single, semi-double or double, can vary in colour from white to pink or red, and their petal arrangement can resemble other flowers, such as roses, peonies or anemones. The specific epithet *japonica* was chosen because Japan is where the species was first encountered by Europeans. Carl Linnaeus named the genus *Camellia* after Georg Kamel (1661-1706), a Moravian Jesuit missionary who studied the flora of the Philippines.

‘Lady Mackinnon’ is a sport of another Japanese camellia cultivar, ‘Tricolor’, meaning it began as a branch of red and white flowers growing on a tree that normally has white and pink flowers. This mutated branch was taken as a cutting and propagated into a new cultivar. ‘Lady Mackinnon’ originated in Japan and was introduced to western horticulture in 1891. It is quite similar to ‘Lady de Saumarez’, another sport of ‘Tricolor’, which has all-red flowers. ‘Lady Mackinnon’ and ‘Lady de Saumarez’ are often mixed-up in the nursery trade due to their similar appearance and parentage, but are easy to tell apart because the former has white blotches on its petals, and the latter does not.

Camellias are often included in artwork and floral arrangements for Chinese New Year because they are symbols of luck, long life and good fortune. *Camellia japonica* has been the state flower of Alabama since 1959, chosen for its popularity among gardeners in that part of the United States.

At VanDusen, ‘Lady Mackinnon’ can be found near the Korean Pavilion in the *Camellia* collection (see map on reverse).

