

Camelliaitis springs eternal

By Martha Ragland

A few days before the Oregon Camellia Society's 73rd annual spring show was held amidst the celebratory swirl of Newberg, Oregon's Camellia Festival last spring, a special "History" section of the *Newberg Graphic* reproduced the newspaper's front page as it appeared 65 years earlier. The lead story (alongside an article decrying neighboring City of Portland's decision to break with surrounding communities by adopting Daylight Savings Time) announced that "a new type of show" would join the ranks of Newberg public events.

Nineteen forty-nine was a good year for camellias in Newberg. In early April of that year, the small city 25 miles south of Portland adopted the Camellia as its official city flower. In addition, more than 400 plants were sold during the newly declared "Camellia Planting Days," and on April 23, the "new type of show"—an official camellia show—took place in the City.

The show's sponsors, the Newberg Men's Garden Club, had at least one member well-known to the American Camellia Society and the Oregon Camellia Society. Russel Gainer, lifetime member of both groups, went on to serve as ACS President for a time. Always genial and enthusiastic, after attending the 1965 convention in Tallahassee, Florida, he published an exuberant article in *The Camellia Bulletin*, in which he declared to all who would hear: "The people who grow camellias, joined at the national level by A.C.S., are the finest people in the world—truly the Great Society."

Many years before, when Gainer moved from Nebraska to Newberg upon finishing high school in 1927, he was hardly a camellia lover. He later wrote, "I had little interest in, or time for, flowers and gardens." He became "infected with camelliaitis" only after his marriage in 1938. His wife liked to garden, and, as he said with his usual sly humor, "The inevitable happened—I had to learn to love flowers and gardens, or else."

Casually spotting a nice red camellia in a neighbor's yard, he decided to plant three of the same in his own. When the plants bloomed a few years later, he got around to learning their name ('*Cheerful*'). At the same time, he learned that more than one variety of these enchanting plants existed.



Coloring the beautiful camellia.

That discovery rocked his world. "Before we realized what was going on," he said, "the yard was so full of camellia plants there was no room for Mrs. Gainer's sweet peas." Only the purchase of an adjacent lot and the erection of a 28' by 58' greenhouse resolved the predicament. Soon Gainer was growing 190 different types of camellias. The fever had turned into a hobby "that produced new



Discussing camellias at the Newberg Camellia Festival.

thrills every year."

Fast forward 60 years. As for those early hopes to stage an annual camellia show in Newberg each spring? Somehow, the shows simply didn't happen. During the Eisenhower years and beyond, the Newberg community followed another horticultural path, developing some of the world's finest *Pinot Noir* vineyards. Few remembered the area's camellia heritage; however, in 1997 Mayor Donna Proctor unveiled an official "Camellia Flag" for the city. But not until 2009, 60 years after Russel Gainer and his Men's Club staged that first spring camellia show, did new and grander plans for such begin to take shape. A number of people, including Denis Dooley, then president of the Oregon Camellia Society, and Bryan Stewart, Head Groundskeeper for the City of Newberg, came together to find ways to celebrate Newberg's historic connection to the flower that grows so well along with wine grapes in the mild climate of the northern Willamette Valley.

Stewart, in the same locale but now with the Chehalem Parks and Recreation District, was and is an early believer in promoting the City's camellia heritage. His enthusiasm is shared by many. Since 2009, the Camellia Festival has developed hand-in-glove with town revitalization. The newly built Chehalem Cultural Center hosts the Festival. As the Cultural Center expands, adding a grand forecourt in 2014 and connecting, in 2015, a fully restored ballroom to an enclosed garden via a stunning glass wall, so also does the Festival grow.

Last spring's celebration included a 5k/10k race, with each contestant awarded a healthy camellia plant at the finish line. Asian art and gardening presentations—from Dragon Dancing to Bonsai to Shakuhachi bamboo flutes—abounded, and the Oregon Camellia Society promoted the ever-beautiful camellia flower to more than 3,000 persons viewing the spring show.

The newly tapped energy and enthusiasm for all-things-camellia in Newberg seems almost unstoppable. The Oregon Camellia Society intends to tap into that energy by encouraging local residents to enter show blooms from their yards and join both local and national camellia societies. Camelliaitis hasn't changed much, after all. It's still a lot of fun.