The Camellia Collection at Washington Park Arboretum offers floral treasures over many months of visits. While you can find camellias growing in various spots around the park, including the Witt Winter Garden, the heart of the collection is the camellia grove on Arboretum Drive, between Rhododendron Glen and the New Zealand Forest. Late February to March is a great time to explore the grove because the Camellia japonica cultivars—which make up the bulk of the collection—are in peak bloom. Recent renovations in the grove have made the space more welcoming and resulted in improved flowering of the collection.

**General Characteristics**

Camellia japonica is a small, broadleaf evergreen tree native to Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and China. In Japan, where it’s called tsubaki, the species is common in mountain forests of the warmer regions of the archipelago. Often growing no more than 10 to 20 feet tall, it is occasionally found at heights of 30 to 40 feet. Upright-to-spreading in habit, it bears polished, leathery, slightly serrated, oval-shaped leaves in an alternating pattern. The bark is an even gray color and very smooth.

Flower buds form in the fall and open in late winter or early spring. In the wild, the blooms
are typically cup-shaped, with five or six broad, deep-red petals and a prominent central cluster of yellow-orange stamens. These develop into small, pear-like fruits with seeds that the Japanese cold-press to produce tsubaki oil, used in cosmetics and cooking. The dried flowers are also eaten, while the leaves are used as a tea substitute. (The closely related Camellia sinensis, from Southwest China, is the species most commonly used to make tea.)

**Cultivated Varieties**

Cultivation of Camellia japonica in China and Japan likely began more than a millennium ago—at first, to adorn the gardens of temples and the nobility. Nowadays, there are many thousands of cultivated varieties offering an enticing array of flower colors and forms.

Flower form is classified as single, semi-double, peony, anemone or formal double. Along with red, the color palette includes white, yellow and pink. The season of bloom has also been expanded. Here in the Pacific Northwest, early bloom is December to February, midseason is March to April, and late varieties bloom in May.

The Arboretum’s collection features more than 150 Japanese camellia cultivars. Many of the specimens growing in the camellia grove date to the 1940s and 1950s and reach up to 20 feet tall or higher. The collection is unique because of its high number of vintage cultivars. These include ‘Amabilis’, with large, single, yellow-centered white flowers that look like white poppies; ‘Shunshoko’, bearing light-pink, semi-double flowers that fade to near white in the center; ‘Ecstasy’, offering bright-pink double blooms; and ‘Red Cardinal’, with single, blood-red blossoms.

**Recent Renovations and Future Plans**

According to Ray Larson, curator of Living Collections at the University of Washington Botanic Gardens, the grove provides ideal growing conditions for camellias. “The site has better drainage than other parts of the Arboretum,” says Ray. “It’s also irrigated, and the high tree canopy provides protection from hot sun.” (Keep these conditions in mind when planting a camellia in your own garden!)

Too much shade can negatively affect flowering, however, and in 2018 the collection site was renovated to let in more light. This included removal and pruning up of some large conifers. Some of the beds were also opened up to make room for new plants, including hydrangeas, which like the same conditions as camellias. The summer blooms of the hydrangeas extend the seasonal interest in the grove.

Future plans include adding more paths to improve access in the grove and continuing to
make space for more Camellia species and cultivars and their relatives. Ray will select plants with darker red flowers and deeper green leaves. He likes Higo camellias, a form of C. japonica with an explosion of yellow stamens in the center of a single flower. (See the Winter 2019 “Arboretum Bulletin” for Daniel Mount’s article about ‘Dewa-tairin’, a Higo camellia first recorded in 1695.)

He’s also fond of Williamsii hybrids—crosses between C. japonica and C. saluenensis that offer exceptional cold hardiness and shade tolerance, as well as flowers that drop their spent petals before they turn brown (no deadheading required). A number of these hybrids can be found in and around the camellia grove already, including Camellia × williamsii ‘J.C. Williams’, which bears orchid–pink, semi–double flowers.

Year-Round Tea Family Beauty
While the japonicas in the camellia grove are the highlight of the collection, it offers beauty most any time of year. You’ll find about a dozen varieties of Camellia sasanqua (from China and Japan), and even a few specimens of Camellia sinensis. Both of these species are late fall bloomers.

The grove is also home to other genera in the larger tea family, Theaceae, including Stewartia, with it gorgeous summer flowers, fall foliage, and colorful winter bark. And let’s not forget Franklinia, with its late summer and early autumn flowers and stunning fall foliage—a lone specimen stands sentry at the northeast entrance of the grove. You’ll also find the unusual camellia relative Polyspora speciosa, which blooms in late fall. (Walt Bubelis profiled this plant in the Winter 2016 issue of the “Bulletin.”)

The large size of the camellias at the grove can make it seem like a wall of green along Arboretum Drive. But don’t be shy about exploring. There’s a garden of hidden treasures inside, and even a lovely old stone bench on which to sit and appreciate the scene. I’ll see you there!

Phil Wood is a garden designer and writer and serves on the “Arboretum Bulletin” Editorial Board. Visit his website at www.philwoodgardens.com.