

Twin Rivers Camellia Club celebrates its Fifth Anniversary

One day in early 2010, a few Camellia enthusiasts met in an unlikely setting: the McDonalds off Route 17 in New Bern, North Carolina. The meeting was called together by Donald Taylor, whose garden in New Bern was practically a temple to camellias, with many varieties that he bought or received over the years, as well as many that he propagated himself. His love of camellias was evident.

Donald had grown up around camellias, both at his own home in Virginia, and in the Wilmington, North Carolina garden of his uncle, Daniel Noe Tucker. Donald been a member of the American Camellia Association and had been in contact with Matt Hunter, who was then ACS State Director for North Carolina and who was reaching out to ACS members in North Carolina, with a view to increasing membership in the state. Matt had been speaking to local garden clubs and Master Gardener groups, where he learned that many folks in the area already grew and loved camellias. Eventually, he and Donald discussed the value of forming a local club for New Bern. Donald thought it was a great idea, but felt that he was “too old” to head a new adventure like that. But he would love to see it a reality and would support it, and so he contacted a few neighbors and friends whom he knew loved camellias almost as much as he did, and put a notice in the Sun Journal announcing a meeting to discuss the formation of a Camellia Club in the New Bern area. The stars were aligned, and a wonderful group of people showed up at that meeting at McDonald’s, a group that would form the core of a new club: Donald, Matt Hunter, B.J. Harrington, Web Slaughter and Pat Sager.

As Matt Hunter, who went from State Director to VP, to President and is now the Immediate Past President of the American Camellia Society explains, “I do not think that either Donald or I could be portrayed as deep thinkers or visionary leaders. Donald was a reluctant leader, and I was trying to get things started.” But the group was very lucky to have on board a dynamic leader in B.J. Harrington, who was happy to take the reins as first president, and get things moving.

Web Slaughter knew Donald as her next door neighbor from as far back as 1965 and, avid gardener that he was, he was always happy to share plants with her and teach techniques. He taught her how to root plants and to air layer camellias, and gave her many camellias for her own garden. Their friendship and love of gardening (and camellias) grew through the years, as they worked on each side of their living fence of shrubs and bushes. Web reminisces that it was not unusual for them to carry on entire conversations without even seeing each other!

And so, the small group formed the Twin Rivers Camellia Club (TRCC) and reached out to other garden clubs to expand membership. The club’s presentations over these past five years have been a real boon to those interested in the care and propagation of camellias. Many newly transplanted northern gardeners loved the idea of a uniquely southern shrub that blooms in the dreary, flowerless days of late fall, winter and early spring. Each monthly program touched on an important aspect of camellia culture, with the last meeting of this club year (it meets in September through May) was, very appropriately, a presentation on the summer care of camellias.

Sadly, Donald Taylor passed away in June, 2011, but left a wonderful legacy, not only as the founding member of the TRCC, but also for developing a new camellia cultivar, the first developed in New Bern, the lovely Johanna Taylor, named in honor of his wife. The Johanna Taylor, a white semi-double japonica with occasional pink stripe, was certified for ACS registration in 2010, following a rigorous documentation process. It is all too fitting that, both in the same year, Donald engendered an all new camellia cultivar and a club to celebrate camellias. The Twin Rivers Camellia club is proud be continuing this legacy five years later, and hopes to do so for many years to come.

If you are interested in becoming a member of the TRCC, or just learning more about growing camellias, contact the President, Mary Holihan, 732-927-9215 for information on meeting dates and venues.

Many thanks to Matt Hunter (Immediate Past President, American Camellia Society), and Web Slaughter for their contributions and to BJ Harrington, author, "New Camellia Cultivar from New Bern" *NC COOPERATIVE EXTENSION PUBLICATION*.