

News from the Spring Tea Gardens At Camellia Forest

Greetings all to all of our tea garden friends, gardeners and tea lovers. Spring is a funny thing sometimes, especially whimsical here in North Carolina where one day it feels like summer is near and the next, we're putting on our coats and gloves. Things are definitely progressing - the peepers (tree frogs and others) have emerged to sing in the evenings, plenty of trees and shrubs are leafing out, the pine pollen is blowing, and the grass and weeds - lots of them - are growing.

The tea plants are showing their new leaf buds. We'll start the harvest in another week or two, though some look ready to go - we'll wait for rain to rinse off the pine pollen. Last year we processed 50 lbs of fresh leaf from our various gardens and made our favorite teas for the First Flush Fest.

This spring, we've added an April Open Studio, "Taster's Choice," which will probably coincide with some of our early harvest. We'll be offering teas of all types to taste - a few pre-made and more to brew, **and a sale (buy 2, get 1 free of a similar size - any type).** Read on for tea garden stories and tips.

Thanks for reading,
Christine



Workshops and Events

Taster's Choice

Open Studio / Tea Sale

Saturday, April 19th
1 - 3 pm

First Flush Fest

Sunday, May 25th
10 - 4 pm

Garden Tour and Tasting

Saturdays, 2 - 4 pm
June 7th and 21st
July 5th and 19th

Harvest & Process Workshop

Sundays, 10 - 3 pm
June 8th and 22nd
July 6th and 20th

Reserve your space early - classes fill up early, especially in June

Camellia Forest

Nursery & Tea Gardens

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Spring Garden Updates

Planning for planting

We usually recommend planting in the fall in our warm climate. This is because it gives the roots time to grow before the summer heat. In this instance, we have a good amount of shade and some mature plants that can handle some stress. But first, the back-story: Over 8 years ago, we tilled 3 rows for planting one fall. But we just ended up planting one!

This was below our terraced hill plantings where we had killed over 100 plants due to poor drainage. So we could see how any of the new plantings fared after we fixed the drainage and improved the soil pH (long story about using the wrong mulch here). They thrived, even as seeds planted directly in the ground. You can see some of them on the edge of the photo to the right.

Spring Tea Workshop: we really enjoyed our time with everyone - here we are planting our “big beautiful bud” tetraploid *var sinensis*



Preparing the beds: David kindly brought his tiller down to rejuvenate 2 beds previously lost in the grass!

From the original rows planned in 2016, we started tilling another in row in 2023, which has been filled with plants, starting with our spring tea workshop planting seedlings from our recently named Carolina Emerald, aka Small Leaf *var sinensis*. To the students who participated - these plants are so happy and growing vigorously. Well done!

How to transform a lawn into a tea garden? Well, first the tilling, which was easier since the clay soil was previously amended. After one pass, a bit more compost was added, and then came the removal of weeds and lawn remnants as we built the beds. We'll be weeding these for years, and will try to catch them early!

Garden Updates Part II

Pruning and Plucking

We do most of our pruning in January and February, followed by plant health assessments and mulching. This is a big job, but gives us a chance to look for damage and try to discourage them by filling the holes and keeping lower branches trimmed. **But first - the pruning. Why do we do it, and what are the different types?** For the young plants, we cut them to form the frame with a plucking “table” with as many up-top branches as possible. Then, we begin light trimming for a few years to help maintain the height and encourage new growth. When the plants have gone through a few years of this, they begin getting taller, and the upper growth gets congested - time for a light prune, removing “crows-feet” (the product of many branching cycles on a single stem). Finally, when plants have outgrown their space and a light prune is not enough, we’ll do a medium prune, cutting back many branches to below their initial growth table. These plants need time to recover, so we usually don’t harvest them the first year, even though they grow back fairly quickly. Below, you can see some bare branches - an example of this. You won’t see the difference by July.



New Growth already on our young plants! Planted last spring, we let it grow several leaves before any plucking. (Note scorch on older leaves - this is seedling of a new variety that may not be a fit for our climate.)



*This cup of tea
in my two hands,
mindfulness is held
uprightly.
My body and mind
dwell in the very
here and now.*

Thich Nhat Hanh



Who is this smiling face? The tea garden daughter, Julia now works in the nursery and helps out with tea our events from greeting, to serving tea, and checking out customers. I am so grateful for her help!

These past few months we've enjoyed visitors during our winter open studio, black, green, and floral blend tea tastings.

Thanks for joining us!

Pictured below - Prunus Mume (Ume - Japanese) blossoms match our screen. In Chinese, Mei Hua



Speaking of Tea

Yes, it's true - we like making, drinking, and speaking about tea!

As winter turned to spring and the Camellias started blooming, we've enjoyed hosting garden clubs that come to see both the tea and the flowers.

Comments from a kind thank you card:

"The Tea Garden was a special treat...So much time and care along with a science/art to bring a cup of warm tea to the table!"

In March Christine had a wonderful visit to South Carolina for a meeting of the Aiken Camellia Society. She enjoyed talking about tea gardening, and learning from members' tea experiences at home and abroad!

In May, Christine is excited to speak to NC state extension agents!

We're available for events (onsite here or there, or online). Please book early as our calendar fills up quickly.



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