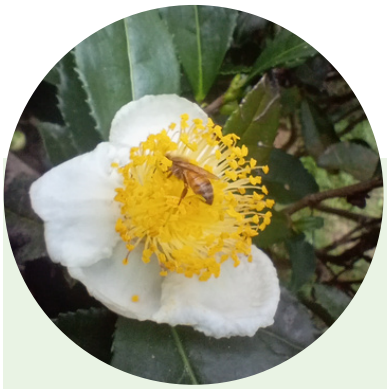
News from the Tea Gardens

At Camellia Forest



Fall 2026

OK - so, when I started the newsletter, it was close to or over 90 degrees with lows in the 60s, and now it is beginning to feel like fall - though low temps close to 40 are a bit of a shock.

Join us in person for our **Fall Tea-For-All Open House, Sunday, October 26th.** Join us for tours, taste our summer harvest, our new Japanese cultivars and fall floral blends (osmanthus oolong)! Patreon members, stay tuned for a virtual tasting

Garden update: It has been a weird season , following the winter freeze, and spring drought that extended well into the summer. By August everyone was confused - the plants *and* the people.

- Seeds on some plants started to ripen early, while others stayed small and dried out
- Plants started/continued growing into late September.
- Now it is dry again, with occasional low yeild rain events.

Needless to say, we've been busy harvesting both tea and seeds, and hope rain comes again (though not all at once)!

Our annual seed sale is happening - get twice as many 2025 seeds for the same price. Viability remains high for 1-year-old seeds. Proven by us and others, our sorting and cold storage keeps them fresh. Another reason to consider the 2025 sale is that the 2026 seed harvest is limited - see page 2 for details. That said, the nusery has plenty of seedlings that are looking great, including new varieties - also see pages 2-3.

Look for updates on our December events, including our chai tea and winter citrus blend.
See you soon, Christine

Workshops and Events

FALL TEA FOR ALL
Sunday, October 25
10 am -4 pm
Tours and Tastings!

Coming in December

- **Pop-up Holiday Teas**
- **Chai Blending Class**
- **Open Studio Saturdays**

Look for email updates on dates/times

PLANTING WORKSHOP
(Replanting and Forest Garden)
Delayed, **Date TBD**
Sign-up for interest/waitlist

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Happening in the gardens, seeds, and something different

Preparing for Planting:
In warmer climates, fall is a great time for planting. But for us, we're taking a break from new rows and our planting workshop. Sometimes nature demands a break, and it has been hard to plan and prepare for planting during a drought. Instead, we are evaluating scattered plant losses and planning for replanting, and more. We have faced other unexpected circumstances, so the timing remains unclear, but we'll be rebuilding one of our beds and preparing something new for the spring. For anyone who is interested, we'd be glad to share the process of replanting and introduce you to our new "Tea Forest." I haven't decided if this will be a class or demonstration, and a price point, or maybe even a volunteer project. Let us know your interests. Right now, we are considering the age of plants, as root congestion starts around 6 inches below the surface. We're glad to provide advice and detailed tours with planting guidelines, will keep you posted about our next workshop in 2027 Spring or Fall.

Seed harvest: Fall flowers are this year's fruit! Usually, seeds start to ripen about the same time the flowers bloom - with pods of 1-4 lobes housing deep brown seeds.

TIP: You can tell they are ripe when they begin to split, but then they will start to fall and dry out within 2-3 days. So, pick them at the first sign, let them open, then store them in an airtight container with a moist paper towel. For synchronous germination, keep them cold for 1-2 months before planting (they will last for 12 or more months). Check out our YouTube videos on seeds.

Seed sale:
Most abundant 2025 seeds available at half-price (twice as many seeds - great viability, good deal). You can start them indoors over the winter with carful attention to watering and warm temperatures, then transplant in spring to pots for summer growth and fall planting!

Varieties to look for on the Camellia Forest Nursery website (camforest.com) or ask in person:

Assorted -- from across our later plantings - great plants from many origins - see page 3.
Black Sea Tea - from an entire plot (10 rows) of seedlings from the Republic of Georgia, uniquly delicious.
China - also assorted, very diverse parent seedlings from China (of course), including Dave's Fave.
Fairhope - from our Fairhope plants (formerly Lipton Plantation), obtained from Fairhope, Alabama.
Ptitophylla - original seedlings from southeastern China, diverse, possible hybrids with var sinensis or assamica.
Taiwan (limited) - from Chia Tsao (see page 3 oolongs), F1 or F2 seedlings, also good for Black tea.
Tetraploid - from seeds distributed by USDA, twice the genome, large leaves, big hairy buds, tiny seeds.
Sochi - from another U.S. nursery, these are from seedlings and Super Sochi clones in our garden, like Black Sea.

Honestly, these may be a better choice than waiting for this year's seeds - the harvest has been limited and likely to sell out quickly, as some seeds matured in August, then stopped and dried out. Stress response (see page 1)? Contact us directly about the availability of newer seed varieties in limited quantities, such as Brewteaful.

On seeds and seedlings at Camellia Forest

We have a rich collection of tea and related species growing in our gardens at Camellia Forest. When recommending plants to people, we often highlight selected clonal varieties (cultivars), usually ones we select based on superior or interesting characteristics. Seedlings are special, though, not just because they generate a tap root or may display hybrid vigor. Because the plants usually don't self-pollinate, seedlings from our garden have a good chance to mix it up after some intense pollinator activity. A single parent plant will always offer characteristics from the mother - seed bearing - plant, which is how we usually name them. In fact, besides the tea genome, seedlings inherit maternal DNA from chloroplasts (which generate carbohydrates through photosynthesis) and mitochondria (which convert carbohydrates into energy for cellular functions). The topic of tea breeding is beyond the scope of this introduction to seedling diversity, but of course both paternal and maternal genomes contribute to the qualities of growth, hardiness, and flavor. Tea mitochondria may influence response to stress and levels of l-theanine, a unique amino acid in tea that affects umami taste.

Across our garden, we have plants from many different countries. So the potential for hybridization of these different backgrounds is extensive. Since tea was first cultivated, hybrids have emerged more rapidly than without without human intervention. Broadly, 4 main types are geographically, genotypically and phenotypically diverse: Camellia sinensis var sinensis (small leaf, cold hardy) and 2 versions of var Assamica, India and southeastern China (think, ancient tea trees, with greater susceptibility to frost). Last, there is the Cambod type (Camellia sinensis var. lasiocalyx), a hybrid of var. sinensis and var. Assamica, with phenotypic similarities as well as shared genetics.

In our garden, we have seen evidence of neighbors breeding, enhancing the production of anthocyanins (red colored – seen in purple tea). Of course, the other parent may be a close neighbor or possibly from other parts of the garden, depending on the pollinator's trajectory. Take the example of one of our favorites, recently named Carolina Emerald. These plants, found in the UNC Arboretum in Chapel Hill, lacked a written record of their origins. But based on location and neighboring plants, my father-in-law estimated the original parent(s) came from Japan about 100 years ago. They survived a severe freeze (below zero Fahrenheit) in his garden 40 years ago. In our current planting, Carolina Emerald and her sisters have relatively small leaves and slow growth compared to most other varieties and have shown their cold hardiness. Ms. Emerald showed some of the least evidence of winter leaf burn after an extended period of deep-freezing nights (below 10 degrees). She is one of the last plants in our garden to start growing in the spring and turns dormant earlier than other varieties. What a surprise, then, when we planted a nice row of 12 seedlings from the mother clone – to find within a few years that only some resembled the mother plant, while others had much larger leaves, with vigorous summer production, and a longer growing season. We didn't see this in the two-year-old seedlings when we planted them, but the trait emerged after several years in the ground. During the extreme freeze this past winter, these did show a lot of cold damage to the leaves; but they recovered and continued to grow with great enthusiasm!

"Looking deeply into your tea, you see that you are drinking fragrant plants that are the gift of Mother Earth... The tea contains the whole universe."

— Thich Nhat Hanh

New Plants and New Classes

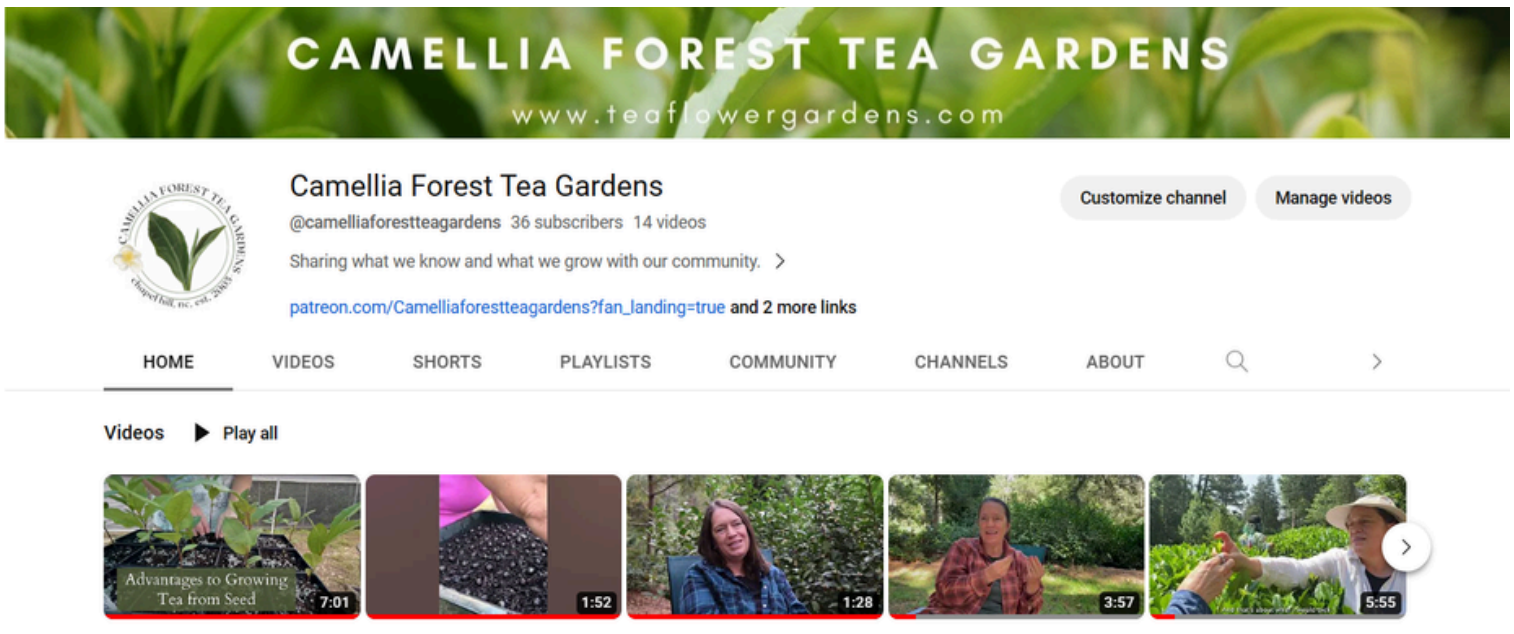
Tea, Honey, and Spices - what's not to love?

We're planning a new class on Chai, *stay tuned, date TBD soon!* Last season, we held our usual class on tea blending, mostly focused on floral and herbal additions. To broaden the offerings, I set a small table with ingredients for Chai. This was overwhelmingly the place to be - almost everyone wanted to make their own blend. So we're planning an entire workshop on Chai blending and tasting. All - from curious and to experienced chai-makers are welcome. We love learning, so feel free to share your favorite ingredients - fresh ginger, pepper, and cardamom are top of my list.

New plants in our garden (and the nursery greenhouses):

Two Oolong cultivars, originally imported by the USDA from Taiwan were distributed amongst interested growers from Hawaii. A few years ago, we received cuttings that allowed us to perform clonal propagation. This year we begin evaluating these plants in our gardens. This year the plants became large enough to begin testing - yummy good times in the studio.

Bohea originally was a cultivar from the Wuyi Mountains. It makes a good high oxidation oolong and is also a great pick for black tea at lower elevations. Descriptions from Hawaii literature describe Bohea as a vigorous plant, with compact stature and small, somewhat oval leaves. The young plants in our garden are exceptionally vigorous but need a very long wither/oxidation phase to obtain pleasant oolong aromas. We have just started making black this fall and plan to try more next year. Enough for a special tasting on a Saturday open studio day. Stay tuned!

Chin Shin Aka Chin-hsin, this is one of the highest quality, popular cultivars in Taiwan. While it has a slower growth rate then some newer cultivars, it offers the flavor profile prized in Dong Ding, Baozhong, and High Mountain (gaoshan) teas. We are tasting the difference! Our Chia Tsao cultivar shares some distinctive leaf characteristics with Chin Shin (both have leaves that are less shiny than Bohea and a little deeper green) but offers a richer flavor profile...either because the plants are older, or maybe due to genetic differences. Chia Tsao is slower growing, so we are looking forward to cross-breeding them to look for improved vigor and taste from their seedlings.

Check out our YouTube channel (or join our Patreon, with more posts, curated workshop content, plus online tea chats, & office hours). If you are interested in filming and editing, we're have plenty of volunteer or bartered opportunities to document whatever suits your fancy!