

At the age of ten, Craig Carroll planted a willow tree on the banks of a Sydney creek. It was the first hint of a passion for plants that would shape his future

# Craig Carroll and his *Camellias*



JAN LOVEGREEN

**B**y fourteen Craig was earning pocket money at a specialist orchid nursery. A year later he had escaped the confines of school to join Tall Timbers Nursery in the Sydney suburb of Glenorie.

Craig's love of camellias was born at home, among those his mother grew. However, in 1975 he made a prophetic visit to 'Eryldene', the beautiful home of camellia expert Professor E.G. Waterhouse, on Sydney's North Shore.

The teenager was inspired by his meeting with the elderly professor and by 'Eryldene's rare and lovely camellias. His visits continued after Professor Waterhouse's death in 1977, when a trust was formed to preserve and maintain the





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ancient ambulance. They were revived by local 'mountain tea', a powerful brew boiled in a billy by one of the policemen. One hopes that the tea possessed an anaesthetic quality, because the night was spent on bare boards!

Plants gathered on this trip, including camellias, were brought back to Australia for a large wholesale nursery and also for Sydney's Royal Botanic Gardens.

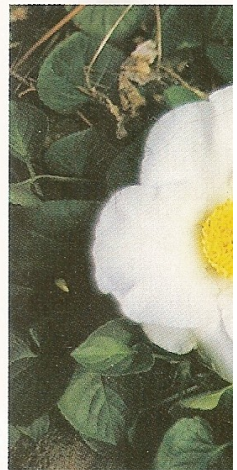
Perhaps the best word to describe Craig Carroll is not gardener, or horticulturalist but plantsman, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* describes as, 'A connoisseur of plants'. Quiet and unassuming, he is only too happy to share his vast knowledge with others. Asked to recommend some reliable camellias for the home gardener he suggested the following:

**For screening purposes:** *C. sasanqua* 'Jennifer Susan' (double pink), *C. sasanqua* 'Plantation Pink' (single pink) or *C. sasanqua* 'Hikuya' (lolly pink, semi-double.) or *C. reticulata* 'Dr. Clifford Parks' (large, red, informal double.) Craig also offered some hints for growing healthy plants.

**Planting:** "Dig a hole at least twice as big as the pot and raise the bed slightly if you strike clay. Add some peat moss or well rotted compost to the soil."

**Feeding:** For weekend gardeners with limited time, Craig suggests an annual application of

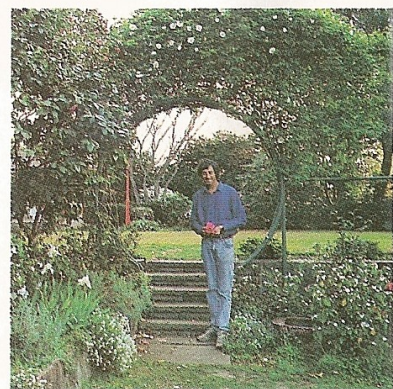
**The first Carroll camellia, *C. japonica* 'Delightful'**



**'Len Bray' camellia blooms photographed at 'Eryldene'**

**Below, Craig Carroll in the grounds of 'Eryldene'**

**Below right, Craig holds examples of 'Ellie's Girl' and 'Delightful'**



property.

A deepening interest in camellias led Craig to the specialist nursery, Camellia Grove, where he spent six valuable years expanding his knowledge. In 1982 he established his own business, specialising in the care of camellias, azaleas and iris.

It is a measure of the respect in which Craig is held that at just 24 he was asked by 'Eryldene's' custodian to provide professional advice on the care of the Professor's camellias. Ten years later he continues to do so, and is also responsible for the pruning of the old trees.

One of Professor Waterhouse's great legacies was a comprehensive nomenclature of camellias. Today, that work is being continued by Mr Tom Savage and some 32,000 varieties have been recorded. Craig Carroll is providing new names for the list by developing hybrids in his Sydney greenhouse.

The first Carroll camellia was a lovely, white

single japonica which he called 'Delightful'. Then came the deep, pink sasanqua, 'Glenorie'. Craig's third camellia, 'Ellie's Girl', will be available in 1993. It is a rich pink, perfectly proportioned reticulata. He also breeds azaleas and iris, and is about to turn his attention to polyanthus.

Craig's passion for plants takes many forms. In recent years he has been a member of specimen gathering expeditions to remote parts of China, Thailand and Vietnam.

In April 1992, he travelled to the province of Hoang Lien Son, in Vietnam's far north-west. The expedition climbed the country's highest mountain to collect seedlings of 'mountain tea' camellias, a rare variety of the plant used in commercial tea production.

Following the climb, the weary party was offered accommodation at an isolated police station, arriving in what Craig describes as 'pretty bad shape', after an unforgettable journey in an





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**Camellia blooms laid out and labelled for easy identification**

camellia and azalea food mixed with eight to nine month formula Osmocote or Nutricote. He says that the best time to feed is in September and adds that "it's important to water two to three times a week in the summer growing season."

**Pruning:** Most books advise pruning straight after flowering, but Craig explains, "There are four surges of growth between August and February. You can prune anytime during that period before the plants become dormant in April. Prune every two or three years."

For inspiration, if you live in or are visiting Sydney follow Craig's example and visit 'Eryldene' when the camellias are at their peak during July and August. Or watch your local paper for camellia shows in your area.

**G&B**

*Pauline Conolly is a writer and Robert Conolly is a photographer. Both are keenly interested in gardens*



ROBERT CONOLLY



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**A glorious display of various camellias at an 'Eryldene' luncheon**

