The camellia is Alabama’s state flower, so it is appropriate that a beautiful garden dedicated to camellias be part of the Birmingham Botanical Gardens. Designed by Birmingham landscape designer Carolyn D. Tynes, it incorporates many camellias that were planted by the Birmingham Camellia Society more than 20 years ago. The object is to display a camellia collection within a garden setting containing related shrubs, trees, and companion plants.

Camellias have been a traditional part of the Old South for so long that many people think of them as native. However, these plants originate in China and Japan. The two most popular and easily grown species are common camellia (*Camellia japonica*) and sasanqua camellia (*C. sasanqua*). You'll find many selections of each in this garden.

Common camellia grows into a small tree about 15 to 20 feet high. Its lustrous, evergreen leaves are oval or rounded and 2 to 4 inches long. Blooms appear in winter or spring, depending on the selection. The long-lasting blossoms are usually semi-double or double in colors of white, pink, salmon, or red.

Sasanqua camellia is smaller in all respects, growing 6 to 15 feet tall with elliptical or ovoid leaves 1 to 3 inches long. The flowers come in the same range of colors as common camellia and may be single, semi-double, or double. Sasanqua camellia blooms in fall.

Visitors can enter the garden from either the Vegetable Garden or from the road that leads to the Kaul Wildflower Garden. If you enter the first way, a brick path takes you under wooden trellises covered with muscadine vines. There are a total of five pressure-treated pine trellises in the Camellia Garden donated by Mr. and Mrs. Thomas A. Burrough.

On the right, you see a unique, pit greenhouse designed by the Senior Design Editor of SOUTHERN LIVING®, Louis Joyner. This solar-heated structure could be used for over-wintering tender species of camellias. A low hedge of tea plants (*Camellia sinensis*) serves as a windbreak. These shrubs aren't grown for their flowers, but their leaves, which are the source of tea. Nearby is a small terrace given by friends of Olivia Turlington Miller.

The centerpiece of the garden is a sunken, circular terrace given in memory of Dr. Lee Franklin Turlington. Its shape symbolizes a camellia blossom. In the middle of the terrace, a fountain surges through an old millstone, which curiously enough, was found on the site lying under a tree. The fountain rises from a small pool that is surrounded by the blossoms of pansies, tulips, and Lenten roses in spring and the foliage of ferns and caladiums in summer.

The terrace’s ample seating provides a multitude of opportunities. Individual visitors can sit, rest, and contemplate the beauty of Nature. Larger groups, such as garden clubs, can conduct meetings, listen to speakers, or enjoy lunch. Even school children can gather and learn about plants.

The terrace has the feel of an amphitheatre, but instead of actors and musicians, plants are on stage. Look around you and, in addition to camellias, you’ll see evergreen and deciduous azaleas, rhododendrons, flowering dogwoods, wax myrtles, and Southern magnolias.

A noteworthy feature of this garden is that it contains many members of the tea (*Theaceae*) family besides camellias. There are several species of stewartias (*Stewartia sp.*), small trees that combine showy, summer flowers with colorful, autumn foliage and handsome, exfoliating bark. Loblolly bay (*Gordonia lasianthus*) is also here, displaying white, summer blossoms amid evergreen foliage. And don’t overlook the franklinia (*Franklinia alatamaha*). This large shrub produced white flowers in late summer and its leaves turn crimson in fall. It was named in honor of Benjamin Franklin by the famous botanist John Bartram, who discovered it growing wild in Georgia in the 18th century. It has since disappeared from the wild and survives today only in cultivation.

The Nettie Hess Camellia Garden is an aesthetic joy and a learning experience. So don’t just visit in spring. Return to see its changing face in summer, fall, and winter.
The Nettie Hess Camellia Garden
given in her honor by
loving family and friends

Dedicated April 1987

The Nettie Hess Camellia Garden

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Written by Stephen P. Bender

The Birmingham Botanical Gardens
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