Fire and Drought and the Palheiro camellias
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In Madeira in summer, there are usually forest fires somewhere on the island. This last year it was our turn. The Quinta do Palheiro lies on a hillside overlooking Funchal, the capital of Madeira. On the 18th July the hillside below and above Palheiro was ablaze.

Strong northeasterly winds were blowing when the fires started in the evening. The fires burned throughout the night and took most of the forest around the property. Fortunately, thanks to the wind direction, the garden itself was saved but the surrounding fields were burnt, the tall hedge interplanted with Cryptomeria japonica between garden and forest was affected and many of our oldest camellias that are planted along the entrance drive and down the avenue were badly burned.

The oldest camellias were introduced to the island by the original owner, Conde de Carvalhal in the early 1800’s. He planted thousands of them along the drive, as a deep, wide avenue and as hedges for windbreaks.

João José Xavier de Carvalhal Esmeraldo Vasconcellos de Atouquia Bettencourt Sà Machado, the first Conde de Carvalhal was born in Funchal 1778, died at Palheiro 1837 and is buried in the chapel in the garden.

He was a great landowner with many properties around the island. His Palacio São Pedro in Funchal is now the Natural History museum. He built his hunting lodge at Palheiro Ferreiro (the name means the blacksmith’s thatched cottage) in the early 1800s in the French style and employed French landscape architects for the layout of his land, with many long avenues of plane and oak trees. The garden layout is still the same as it was then.

The Count left the island to seek refuge in England by boarding the English corvette, the ‘Alligator’ in 1828, during the Miguelite wars at the time of Don Miguel, who was disputing the Portuguese crown. On his return in 1834 he found his beloved Palheiro ransacked by soldiers.

As the Count did not have any children, his estate went to a nephew, Antonio Leandro da Camara Carvalhal Esmeraldo Atouquia Bettencourt de Sà Machado, who became the second Conde de Carvalhal, born 1831, died 1888. After he managed to spend the family fortune, having a good time in the capitals of Europe, the Quinta do Palheiro was sold in 1885 to John Burden Blandy, who build his own house, the New House, on the hill above the garden and this is where the family still lives today.
We do not really know how many of the original camellia plants are still here, nor do we know if the Count had his own special interest in raising his own. There are no records, but it was of course very fashionable at that time to grow camellias.

The difference in sizes of plants comes from where they were planted, some have thick trunks, and some very thin ones and some have multiple trunks. What is very interesting is that the camellias in front of the old house all had one straight trunk only. Did they have a special treatment?

My mother-in-law Mildred, who came from South Africa, brought in plants from all over the world and cared for the garden for 50 years until her death in 1984, when I took over. She loved camellias and brought in many new ones as from the 1950s.

Among them we have four trees of the wonderful *Camellia granthamiana* from Hong Kong and many lovely reticulatas and sasanquas as well.
My mother-in-law did a lot of grafting. I can still remember from the seventies, the small ‘cavalos’, as rootstocks are called here, simple *Camellia japonica*, growing in long beds, to be used for grafting exciting new varieties.

There is a list from 1972 with 149 named camellias, some of them lost over the years. In 2003 when I took up the interest, I managed to find quite a few old labels, especially on the ones brought here by my mother-in-law. When Jennifer Trehane came out in February of 2005 we did a lot of work on trying to put pictures corresponding with the names we had on the list and I think we were quite successful.

As in many parts of the world, Madeira is feeling the climate change. During the winter months we used to have weeks of mist and rain at our altitude. Now, since some years back, we are basking in glorious summer weather, which of course is good for the visitors to the island!

This has taken its toll on quite a lot of our camellias, especially the ones with no shade trees above them. And of course with less winter rains we have to be extra careful with the water we do get.

We have our own reservoir so therefore can check the amount of water we can use during the dry season. In the garden the lawns are the first areas not to receive any water as we have to concentrate on the flowerbeds!

Soon after the fire, we started to prune some of the younger ones (from the 1960’s) and most of them are responding. The old ones we left for the late spring to see which have survived as many were partially burnt producing flowers on one side only.

By now we can, with great joy, see new growth on some of the old trees after pruning.

This is ongoing work for months ahead as the garden itself needs constant attention.

 Luckily, there are still so many camellias around to be enjoyed, together with the rest of these wonderful gardens!

The garden of Palheiro covers 30 acres and, as well as its camellias, contains plants from all over the world. It is open to visitors every day.