

## Stop 385 Adult Tour – Tea, Cool Temperate House

Excluding water, tea is the most widely consumed beverage in the world. *People* have been drinking it for over 3,000 years! While the word tea can refer to infusions made from the leaves, blossoms, or other parts of any plant, in this case we are specifically referring to a brew made from the leaves of the tea plant, *Camellia sinensis*. So why isn't it in the Camellia Corridor? Because it's not an ornamental grown for its flowers, and it's the only species of camellia grown as an economic crop.

Native to China, tea plants bear a fragrant white flower, much smaller than the ornamental *Camellia japonica*. In the wild, tea trees can reach 45 feet, but in cultivation they're pruned and maintained as 4 – 6 foot shrubs. Introduced to Japan in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, tea was elevated to an art form with the creation of the Japanese Tea Ceremony. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, tea became popular throughout Europe and the American colonies, playing an important role in those societies' cultures and customs as well. The only place tea is produced commercially in North America is at the Charleston Tea Plantation on an island off the coast of South Carolina.

There are three main types of *Camellia sinensis*: China, Assam (mostly found in India), and Cambodian (a cross between the other two). Yet there are more than 2,000 commercial teas on the market. The wide-ranging flavors are the result of differences in soil, climate, and how the plant is harvested and processed. Tea leaves are plucked by hand every two weeks - with the finest teas being made from only the top bud and two leaves of tender new growth. The leaves are processed using a combination of steaming, withering, and drying or firing in an oven. The differences between black, green and oolong tea relate to how much fermentation is allowed to take place before the leaves are dried.

Tea's medicinal properties have often been overlooked. While tea leaves contain small amounts of caffeine, they also contain flavonoids, tannins, and vitamin C - giving tea it's antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, and antibacterial properties. Perhaps there is some truth to the belief that tea drinkers live long lives.