



Camellia Club of Mobile

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May 2026




April Meeting Recap & May Picnic Announcement

The Camellia Club of Mobile enjoyed an outstanding April meeting featuring a fascinating and highly informative presentation by Don Oyler on camellia seeds. Don shared his extensive knowledge on seed development, pollination, growing techniques, and briefly discussed the process of registering new camellia cultivars. His presentation offered a detailed look into a topic many of us don't often explore, and members left with a deeper appreciation for the science and care behind growing camellias from seed.

A very special highlight of the meeting was celebrating Jim Smelley's 98th birthday! Jim is a treasured member of our camellia community and is well known throughout the camellia world for his knowledge and contributions. We were honored to celebrate this milestone with him.

May Event – Year-End Picnic

Instead of a regular meeting, we will close out the season with our annual year-end picnic, always a favorite among members. This relaxed, pot-luck gathering is a wonderful opportunity to enjoy fellowship and celebrate another great year together.

-  Date/Time: Saturday, May 2nd, 1:00 PM
-  Location: Mr. Jimmy's (please contact Maureen for directions)
-  Pot-luck: Bring a favorite dish to share

As usual, the meeting concluded with a plant raffle, with Jim generously donating eight of his plants. Lucky winners went home with these special selections—each one a wonderful reminder of Jim's passion and long-standing contributions to the camellia community.

We hope to see everyone at the May picnic as we wrap up a fantastic camellia season!





The Only Real Camellias at the Ball

A 1948 Story from Garden to Ballroom Featuring an interview with Janice Wheeler Greer

By Maureen Ryan Kennedy

In 1948, as Mobile's Camellia Ball brought together the city's debutantes in a celebration of beauty and tradition, one young woman stood apart—not because of her gown, but because of the flowers she carried.

Janice Wheeler Greer, then a debutante, entered the ballroom holding a cascading bouquet of soft pink 'Debutante' camellias. Unlike the other young women that evening, her bouquet was not fashioned from substitute blooms or florist stock. Hers were real camellias—freshly cut by her father.

And she was the only one.



Original presentation sketch of Janice Wheeler's debutante gown, featuring a camellia bouquet.

A Family Rooted in Camellias

Janice was the daughter of Murrell Rudolph Wheeler and Fannie Mae D'Olive Wheeler, a family deeply connected to Mobile's horticultural life. Her mother was actively involved in garden clubs in the Mobile area, part of a vibrant network of civic and horticultural organizations that helped shape the city's landscape and traditions.



Murrell Rudolph Wheeler, camellia grower and nurseryman, known for his skill in grafting camellias.

Her father, Murrell Wheeler, was a nurseryman whose specialty was grafting camellias—a skill that required patience, precision, and deep knowledge of the plant. He worked in partnership with a man Ms. Janice remembers as Mr. Richards, operating a nursery business during a time when Mobile was emerging as one of the most important camellia-growing regions in the United States.

In 1948, the Wheeler family moved from the city down to the Bay, settling in the Belle Fontaine area along Dauphin Island Parkway—an area well-suited for camellia cultivation, with its mild coastal climate and acidic soil.

The Camellia Boom in Mobile

By the 1940s, Mobile had become a center of camellia culture in the South. The influence of Japanese horticulturists such as Kosaku Sawada and Tsukasa Kiyono, along with pioneering growers like Tom Dodd and William H. Rubel, helped establish the region as ideal for camellia cultivation.

These growers introduced new varieties, refined propagation techniques, and elevated camellias from ornamental shrubs to prized specimens. At the same time, countless smaller growers—families like the Wheelers—quietly contributed to this flourishing culture by cultivating plants on their own land, sharing cuttings, and participating in local horticultural circles.

Camellias were not yet widely available through commercial florists. They were delicate, easily bruised, and difficult to transport. If you wanted camellias for a special occasion, they almost always had to come from a local garden.

A Bouquet Unlike Any Other

As Janice recalls, the idea was her own.

She asked her father if her bouquet for the Camellia Ball could be made from pink ‘Debutante’ camellias—one of the most popular and admired varieties of the time, introduced only a little more than a decade earlier in 1935.

Murrell Wheeler agreed.

He carefully selected blooms at their peak from his own plantings and took the fresh camellias to a small family florist in downtown Mobile, near Barton Academy, where they were arranged into a cascading bouquet befitting a debutante presentation.

The result was striking—not only for its beauty, but for its rarity.

While other debutantes carried arrangements made from more durable or readily available materials—or even roses flown in for the occasion—Janice carried flowers grown by her father, cut from his own plants, and brought directly from garden to ballroom.



Janice Wheeler, 1948 Camellia Ball, Mobile, Alabama, holding a cascading bouquet of pink 'Debutante' camellias grown and cut by her father, Murrell Rudolph Wheeler.

A Full-Circle Connection

This remarkable story came to light in a way that feels just as meaningful as the bouquet itself.

Through a chance connection, I had the pleasure of meeting Janice's daughter, Tutta Greer Cone. As we talked, we quickly realized a shared thread—camellias. Her grandfather's work growing these beautiful blooms and her grandmother's involvement in Mobile's garden club circles mirrored so much of the history we continue to celebrate today.

That connection deepened even further with the discovery of a 1972 newspaper photograph, preserving another moment in the family's story and reinforcing just how lasting their ties to Mobile's horticultural community have been.

It was a reminder that camellias do more than bloom—they connect generations.



Mrs. Murrell Wheeler (center right) and Pat Ryan (far right), the author's father, pictured in a 1972 Mobile Register article highlighting local garden club activities.

A Living Connection to Mobile's Camellia Heritage

Photographs capture more than a formal occasion—they preserve a moment when Mobile's camellia culture was deeply personal and rooted in the land.

Janice's bouquet tells a larger story—of a father's skill as a grower, a family deeply involved in camellias, and a time when these blooms were not ordered, but grown and shared.

Murrell Wheeler may not be widely recorded among the great names of camellia history, yet his work—and that of others like him—helped sustain the very culture those names represent.



1948 Camellia Ball Queen's Luncheon



A moment from Mobile's Mardi Gras season—where the beauty of the Camellia Ball tradition met the elegance of the debutante presentation



Mr. And Mrs. Murrell Rudolph Wheeler

Today, thanks to Janice Wheeler Greer's recollections—and the connections that brought this story forward—we are able to glimpse that world again, where a simple request from a daughter led to a singular moment of beauty, and where, for one evening in 1948, the most remarkable flowers in the room came not from a florist, but from a family garden.

As we wrap up the season, this will be my final full newsletter. When meetings resume in September, I will be serving in a new Board position, and future communications will be more streamlined in format.

Thank you for the opportunity to share the history, blooms, and stories that make our Club so special.

— *Maureen Ryan Kennedy*
Newsletter Editor

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Camellia Club of Mobile please visit
our website:**
<http://www.mobilecamellia.org/>

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