

*Legendary University
of Georgia coach Vince
Dooley now produces
winning camellias*

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS
BY STEPHEN JONES

Why does a Hall of Fame football coach, much loved by Bulldog faithful as the architect of University of Georgia athletics, belong on the pages of the Journal of the American Camellia Society? You've probably already guessed that Vince Dooley has found a new passion in life—gardening, especially growing camellias.

During his career as head coach at UGA from 1964-1988, Dooley won 201 games, a national championship, and six Southeastern Conference championships. Under Dooley's tenure as athletic director from 1979-2003, UGA athletics brought home to Athens 18 national championships and 75 SEC titles and expanded the program to include 21 sports.

It has been nearly five years since Dooley, now 75, has left the University of Georgia athletic directorship, and, among many other things, he has become a certified Master Gardener. He loves to grow just about anything that he can plant in the backyard of his Athens home, and that includes a large variety of camellias, including japonica, sasanqua, sinensis and even oleifera.

Dooley says his interest in growing green things came about in the last 10 years, having grown out of his own inquisitive nature. "I was just curious about trees and plants and shrubs. Traditionally, I have always satisfied my curiosity. That's the great thing about living around a university—you can find an expert on almost anything," he explains. Previously, Dooley had audited classes to indulge his interest in Civil War history and political science.

Dooley then turned his interest towards

Hall of Fame Football and Flowers



Famed University of Georgia football coach Vince Dooley grows 110 different camellia varieties at his Athens, GA. home. Most are planted along his "Camellia Walk," but a few such as these japonicas 'Stellar Sunrise' (back) and 'Nuccio's Bella Rossa' (front) occupy pots on his patio.

all things horticultural. He had the good fortune of having access to two icons in their own fields—Dr. Michael Dirr and Dr. Allan Armitage, both professors at UGA. Dooley calls Dirr the author of “the bible on woody plants and trees” and Armitage “a perennials expert.”

“One course led to another course,” says Dooley, who soon found himself on a full-blown “quest for learning” about horticulture. That quest, driven by the pure “joy of learning” has taken him from the classroom to traveling around the world. Dooley has traveled twice to England with Dirr and even attended the International Hydrangea Conference in Belgium. A cultivar of *Hydrangea macrophylla*, a common companion plant for camellias, bears Dooley’s name. It is described as having extremely large blue or pink mophead flower heads. The ‘Dooley’ hydrangea is unusual in that it sets flower buds at each node, often allowing it to bloom in summers when harsh winter temperatures have caused other varieties to lose their flowering buds.

There’s also an award-winning camellia named after the coach. ‘Vince Dooley’ was registered in 2004 and is a hybrid *C. reticulata* X *C. japonica* seedling hybridized from ‘Red Crystal’ and ‘Silver Lace’ by the late Dr. Walter Homeyer. ‘Vince Dooley’ is characterized by a single, scarlet red bloom that has pink stamens and anthers. The flower is long-lasting with heavy petal texture and is best suited for exhibition.

The late Dr. Daniel E. Nathan of Fort Valley introduced the coach to the lovely world of camellias. “We both shared common interests—the Georgia Bulldogs and camellias,” says Dooley. Dooley says Nathan got together with Dr. Inman “Buddy” English of Warner Robins and found the perfect candidate to bear Dooley’s name. “It’s a huge red camellia that gets its cold-hardiness from *C. japonica* and its big bloom from *C. reticulata*,” he says.

While he is not sure of the exact count, Dooley grows a “good variety” of camellias in his personal garden, which is constantly being expanded to the point it has spilled out onto his neighbor’s property. “You are always interested in expanding your garden, but I’ve run out of space. I have two and a half acres of my own and two and a half to three acres leased from my neighbors,” he says.

Of course, one reason for his love of camellias is their winter blooms. “By enjoying a wide variety of plants and shrubs,



Top: Dooley is meticulous about identifying his camellias. However, finding the tags on them can sometimes be challenging. Above: ‘Crimson Candles’, a hybrid of *C. reticulata* X *C. fraterna*. Left: Dooley with his wife Barbara

I have a garden for all seasons. There is something going on whenever you come,” says Dooley. He tries to get into his own garden daily when he is not away traveling. “I like to make a lap around the garden every morning when I am on my home routine. I am always astonished to find something blooming in the dead of winter,” he says. “What’s fun about it is that there is always something going on, there is always something blooming.”

The *C. japonica* ‘Desire’ is one of Dooley’s favorites. Blooming in late November to early December, it is the first of his camellias to show its colors in Dooley’s garden each season. “‘Desire’ is an early-blooming japonica, an almost formal double, white with pink outline,” he says.

‘Scentsation’ is another Dooley favorite. It features medium-to-large silvery pink peony form flowers, but more importantly

is one of the few fragrant cultivars.

“I like them all. I haven’t met one I haven’t liked,” he says. While Dooley certainly has his darlings, his absolute favorite is variety itself. “I’ve got a good variety of early, mid and late bloomers,” Dooley says, and his garden showcases camellias throughout the season. “I like the evergreen feature of the camellia. It looks good all year round. And, of course, when it is blooming is when most other plants aren’t blooming. There is such an endless variety of beauty in the flowers—color, form and beauty,” he says.

There’s more to camellias than their beauty, Dooley will tell you. “They’re pretty sturdy. You can’t mistreat them too much,” he says. Perhaps the greatest testament to that would come from a sasanqua that Dooley moved in his garden. “I had to move it and in order to do so I whacked



Dooley makes a lap around his “camellia walk.”

it all to pieces with a chainsaw—roots and all,” he says. “Now, it’s come back. I thought there was no way in the world that plant would survive after what I had to do to move it. I even had to chainsaw the roots. But I stuck it in the ground and it’s come back.”

With ‘Scentsation’ being among Dooley’s favorites, it’s no surprise the current work being done by hybridizers to add fragrance to more varieties is of keen interest to him. “I have great respect for those people,” he says of those working to make camellias even more appealing than they already are.

As for camellia reference materials, Dooley says, “The best camellia book is *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Camellias* by Stirling Macoboy.” He says he also enjoys keeping up with the camellia world

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through publications of the ACS.

“It’s continuous learning, which I enjoy, and looking at new varieties and meeting different people who have an absolute passion for these plants,” Dooley says. These people include Bobby Green of Green Nurseries in Fairhope, Alabama. “Bobby is a good friend and a wonderful camellia man,” he says.

Thanks in large part to such friends, Dooley has amassed a collection of unusual plants above and beyond the foundation of classics. “Through the generosity of a lot of people in the industry, I have a mini botanical garden. Sometimes it can become a monster—I do a lot of the work myself. But I like variety and I like new introductions and new plants. People share with me special ones they like,” he says.

His hope is that someday his garden will be open for all to see. “I enjoy giving tours and a lot of people come over. My hope is one day it will just turn into a little botanical garden in the city that people can enjoy visiting,” Dooley says.

In the end, though, his true motivation is simple. “Gardening is certainly rewarding. It is good for the body, good for the mind and good for the spirit,” he says.