The family camellia nursery was a gift from his grandfather that Harry Moses would treasure, enjoy and see returned to fruition.

Sometimes a genetic trait will skip a generation. It took two trips to the emergency room to identify an allergy to shrimp I inherited from my paternal grandmother, although the little decapod crustaceans had no such effect on my father. Thankfully, the inheritance Harry Moses and his siblings and cousins received from their maternal grandfather, Walter Morris, was of a more pleasant nature and has even been linked to a healthier and longer life. As I followed Harry and his wife Jackie through the camellia trees, I understood why.

There was a sense of wildness and serenity among the camellias that slowed my steps. The blooms swayed in the spring breeze, sitting through the mental clutter in my mind. For the first time that morning, I felt completely in the moment. No wonder Harry's grandfather lived to be 91, I thought.

The eight to ten acres of camellias were once part of a nursery called Hasawaca. Through the years, Harry has often been asked if the name was of Native American origin, which was a logical assumption, since such has been the source for many local places, including the Altamaha River. But Hasawaca was Harry's grandfather's own creative invention, an acronym formed with the first two letter's of family names: his wife Hannah; daughter Sarah; his own name Walter; and daughter Carolyn, who was also Harry's mother.

Mr. Morris didn't plan to become a nurseryman. In fact, his career was actually in education. He taught and served as Superintendent of Schools in Emanuel County for many years. In the late 30s, Mr. Morris bought a hundred-acre tract of land from his brother-in-law and built a seven-room log house in the early 40s for a summer home. It was also where the Morris's tended a garden. But unlike the vegetables they grew to eat, Mr. Morris began to grow camellias simply for their beauty. In 1950, after 35 years in education, he retired, and he and his wife Hannnah made the log house their permanent home.

In 1971 there was a kitchen fire, and the log house burned to the ground. "My grandmother was cooking something on the stove and forgot about it," said Harry. "The curtains caught on fire in the window, and it burned down almost as quick as it got started." All that remained was the barn and the camellias and other plants.

A new house was built, and Walter and his wife moved on. Someone once asked Harry if his grandfather held a grudge against his wife for the accident. "They weren't like that," he answered. "A house could be rebuilt. What they valued most was each other and family."
The character to move on and enjoy life after material loss is a rare quality these days. But I looked around at the camellias, now 45 to 60-years old. They still spoke so much about the character of the man who tended them as well as the grandson who now worked to restore them.

Camellias, which originated in southeastern Asia, are a winter blooming plant, "which is why they are still so popular," said Harry. The evergreen shrubs or trees bloom from late fall through early spring. According to the American Camellia Society website, "There are over 250 known species to the genus camellia," and the varieties of each species number in the thousands.

The most common camellias grown in the South are Japonicas and Sasanquas. Japonicas usually bloom from January to March and grow more upright with larger leaves than the Sasanquas. The shorter Sasanquas have smaller leaves and flowers and bloom from October to December. Both appear in many types and colors. (There are also many varieties of tea produced from the leaves of the Camellia Sinensis plant).

"Almost all of these camellias were grafted by my grandfather," said Harry as he pointed to a beautiful red bloom with white blotches and fringed petals. "This was my grandfather's favorite. It's called Ville de Nantes after a city in France. It's a simple yet elegant old cultivar," which sounded like a dead body to me but just meant it was produced in cultivation by selective breeding, he explained. "This camellia won best in show for ten or fifteen years, but it has since been surpassed by newer varieties."

This past winter was brutal, but it was especially hard on the camellias, according to Harry, which made for fewer and smaller blooms. Even so, the blooms were breathtaking to me. I could not imagine the spectacle a good year would make.

"This is the only camellia my grandfather ever registered," said Harry pointing out another beautiful bloom. Hasawaca, the name his grandfather gave the camellia, is described in the American Camellia Yearbook, 1978, as "A very large, rose-pink, anemone form, japonica chance seedling, mid-season flowering. Originated by Walter R. Morris, Vidalia, Georgia, USA. The 21 years old seedling first flowered 1960. The flower has 13 petals, 28 tepaloids, yellow, pink-based filaments, yellow anthers..."

After his retirement, Mr. Morris's pastime soon turned into a second career. "My grandfather sold plants in containers mostly, which he kept on irrigation. He also sold azaleas, boxwoods, and dogwoods. These were the popular plants for landscape around here at the time. I can remember on Sundays we'd be sitting around after eating, and somebody would drive up and honk the horn. My grandfather would put on his hat and go out to see them."

In 1965 at the age of 68, Mr. Morris retired for the second time. He sold his containerized stock but continued to care for his garden of camellias for over 20 more years. After his passing in 1987, his daughters tried to keep up the work as best they could, but according to an online article in 2010 Harry wrote for the Southeastern Camellia Society, many issues began to arise, such as, "...large pine trees which had sheltered the plants for forty years fell, damaging or killing plants. Weeds began to appear, and spread. The woods around the margin of the camellia plantings were encroaching. Petal blight took hold. Scale was prevalent, and nothing had been
fertilized or sprayed. However, through all of this time these magnificent plants were producing thousands of lovely blooms each year.”

After the deaths of Mr. Morris’s daughters, Sarah and Carolyn, the property passed to Harry, his brother Rusty, his cousin Gissy Comer Alderman, all of Vidalia, his sister Mary Ann Moses King of Tybee Island, and cousin Don Comer of Raleigh NC. They had all loved the “Home Place” and the beautiful flowers.

In 1999, with the support of all the family members to whom Hasawaca now belonged, Harry and Jackie devised a courageous plan to begin an “improvement program.” But even with the help of the other family members, it was an enormous undertaking. By that time, the average height of the camellias was over six feet. It wasn’t until 2003 when Harry sold his construction company, Harry Moses Construction, and retired, that he was able to give his “hobby” the attention it required. Ironically, he was the same age that his grandfather had been at his retirement.

“We have about 400 camellias here of 300 or so varieties,” said Harry as he stooped to recover a plastic label from the undergrowth. “I’ve identified about 250 varieties so far,” he said, a task complicated by the fact that many of his grandfather’s labels were missing or no longer legible.

“Many of the camellias at Hasawaca are old varieties,” said Harry. “I’ve kind of given up on identifying more than I already have. There aren’t many people left who know the names of these camellias. This one is called Ethel Davis,” pointing to a tree with beautiful pale pink blooms.

Other names of camellia trees at Hasawaca included Rev. John Drayton, Dr. Tinsley, Barney Diamond, Monte Carlo, Don Mack, Adolf Anderson, Adolphe Audusson, Louise Maclay, Mrs. Jimmy Davis, and Mrs. D.W. Davis, which was one of Harry’s favorites. “Mrs. Jimmy Davis didn’t quite make the impression Mrs. D. W. Davis made. I hope they weren’t sisters,” said Harry with a smile.

A favorite white camellia among Harry’s family is the White Nun. “But the camellia you’ll find around many of the houses in Lyons is this one,” he said. “It’s called Pink Perfection.”

Black Magic was among Jackie’s favorites. The petals of the bloom looked like velvet. “We only have two of these,” said Jackie.

The names intrigued me. Each camellia was someone’s story. Some were the names of people who worked with camellias. Others were named after famous (or infamous) people such as Richard Nixon, Bob Hope, Gen. George Patton, Pope John XXIII, Neil Armstrong, and others.

“People say they don’t know what they would do if they retired. But if you’ve got a farm, there’s always something to do to keep it up,” said Harry. “I’ve got about 1,000 cuttings that we will step up to pots over here,” he said as we walked through the propagation shed. “Starting tomorrow we’ll begin to transplant them into one gallon pots.”

It had been a while since my last school science lesson, but Harry did his best to explain the difference between propagation by cutting and by grafting. Cuttings are small stems placed in soil to produce roots, he explained. With grafting, a small cut from a plant is attached to a host called a rootstock.

“If we took this shoot,” he said as he broke off a small piece of a branch, “we would take
all the leaves off and cut it to a point. This would be called a scion. You use a big healthy root system of under stock to force rapid growth in the grafted scion. We would find a healthy rootstock and split the root across the middle. We would then put the scion down into the split so that the edge of the under stock lines up with the edge of the scion. If the graft takes, you only get what's grafted on. Nobody counts on chance pollination much anymore,” he added, although it didn’t seem to matter much to the bees that flew in and out of the camellia blooms.

The camellias have also given Harry and Jackie an activity they could enjoy together in their retirement. Another added benefit has been new connections and friendships with other camellia enthusiasts through the Southeast Camellia Society.

“We’ve been to a wonderful Camellia Festival near Lucca, Italy, twice. The first time, we found it by chance. We saw 250 to 350 year old camellias there with huge trunks. Those were the oldest camellias we’d ever seen,” said Harry.

As I prepared to leave, Harry and Jackie graciously gave me three camellias that were ready for planting. The Moonlight Sonata Camellia had soft light pink blooms, and the blooms of the Joshua Yount Camellia were a beautiful white. The third was a deep rose pink camellia called Guilio Nucio. “Nucio Nurseries is a premier family of camellia growers in the U.S. from California,” said Harry. “Guilio Nucio has quickly become one of my favorites, although I think my grandfather would be upset if he knew I’d left the Ville de Nance in favor of something else.”

We packed the plants in my car, and as I drove away, it was with trepidation. I knew something Harry and Jackie did not. There’s this bad joke around my house that if a plant or tree survived in my yard, it had proven itself a survivor.

Even though I listened to Harry’s instructions on planting the camellias, I knew the truth, as I guiltily glanced in the mirror at the green leaves that swayed from the air that blew from the vents.

But I knew something else as well. In my infamous plant deprived yard stood a camellia tree every bit of eighteen feet tall that came from a cutting my husband’s grandmother, Ma Betty, gave to me. The cutting came from a camellia she brought with her to Lyons when she moved from Atlanta. Ma Betty had the magic touch (called hard work) that made everything she planted beautiful. Now every time it blooms I think of how wonderful she was and how much she loved us all.

Carefully, I set the plants under my carport and went inside. That night when my daughter Erin came for supper, she said, “Mama, we’ve just started working on our landscaping. Don’t you want me to take those camellias on the porch?” She smiled.

It really was an act of mercy. I knew down deep it would be a shame to chance the survival of the fittest test on these beautiful camellias from Harry and Jackie Moses. At least they would still be in the family, I reasoned. Obviously, I’m not depending on gardening genes for longevity.

In a few weeks Harry and Jackie’s grandchildren will return for a visit. Harry proudly showed me the camellias his grandchildren were growing in the propagation shed. Like his grandfather before him, Harry is teaching his grandchildren what it means to care for the camellias at Hasawaca. Perhaps it’s not so much the genes you inherit, I pondered, as the life you demonstrate that gives the next generation their most valuable traits. †TCM