



Botanical beginnings

Chanel has been researching camellia flowers since 1998 when it opened its first 'open sky lab' in the rolling hills of Gajacq in the South-West of France. With its fertile soil and microclimate of mild summer and winter temperatures, it's an idyllic setting for camellia to thrive.

Chanel's 70 hectares organic camellia farm and research laboratory was established in collaboration with Jean Thoby, an international camellia expert, whose own botanical conservatory garden is only a few kilometres away. Dedicated to plant conservation, the garden is home to 2,000 varieties of camellias from around the world, including two seedlings from the mother plants supposedly ordered by Coco Chanel more than a century earlier. These pure white Camellia japonica 'Alba Plena' became the starting point for Chanel's crops.

I'm one of the first journalists to visit both hallowed grounds. Thoby's garden sits adjacent to a white-washed shabby-chic French farm house with blue shutters. There's little to suggest the connection with a luxury fashion house, apart from a building repurposed by Chanel for educational events. Nature is the thing of beauty here: birdsong, the meditative hum of bees and the soft flutter of wings from a turmeric-coloured butterfly that hungrily darts from bloom to bloom. This I later learn is the Marsh Copper, a protected species that had all but vanished until the camellia fields arrived. A rudimentary mud path leads uphill past vast swathes of towering camellia bushes, a weeping willow and other trees laden with confetti-like blossoms. Like a Gallic Garden of Eden, it's got the wow factor.

Similarly, there's nothing industrial about the farm where Chanel's camellias are grown and traditional farming methods

Jean Thoby, international camellia expert makes his selection



The building block of the N°1 de Chanel sustainable skincare line can be found on the brand's 70 hectares organic camellia farm and research laboratory



meet scientific innovation. "2,700 Camellia japonica 'Alba Plena' are cultivated in the open field, according to environmentally friendly agricultural practices, without the use of pesticides, herbicides and chemical fertilisers," explains Philippe Grandry, Chanel's crop operations manager at the farm. To be a pioneer in environmental protection and sustainable development is the aim for this project, he says.

Hence the focus on preserving local ecosystems and conserving biodiversity. In practice, what this means is trees and shrubs have been introduced to provide natural shade for the camellias, but also to prevent soil erosion, increase resistance to disease and provide shelter for pollinators and birds. This approach is bearing fruit in more ways than one. It has earned Chanel a level 3 HVE (High Environmental Value) certification, the gold standard for farms. And had it not been for this project, the white camellia, which is only cultivated in Gajacq, may have disappeared altogether.

During the harvest, the camellias are hand-picked, weighed and immediately frozen to preserve the potency of their active molecules before being delivered to the on-site laboratory. Its presence close to the crops reduces both the carbon footprint and the time it takes for these molecules to be extracted, filtered and concentrated. It also makes it easier to control the quality of the crops and guarantees complete transparency when it comes to ingredient traceability.

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Skincare's rising star

The Camellia japonica flowers in January and blooms in March. By studying its resistance to winter frost, Chanel researchers have discovered "molecules, which demonstrate exceptional moisturising properties," explains Nicola Fuzzati, director of innovation and development of cosmetic ingredients at Chanel. "The active ingredient created from the Camellia japonica 'Alba Plena' is concentrated in polyphenols. These help to restore and maintain water reserves by targeting a key skin mechanism that continuously activates natural hydration."

The white-petalled 'Alba Plena' has been the key active in Chanel's Hydra Beauty skincare line, including the vastly popular Micro Serum and Micro Crème, since 2009. It's now joined in Gajacq by a red variety of Camellia japonica, known as 'The Czar', which Chanel has made the star of its new blockbuster line of N°1 de Chanel skincare. The red petals contain a high concentration of protocatechuic acid, "an active molecule previously unseen in the camellias analysed by Chanel scientists," says Fuzzati. A powerful antioxidant, it helps to protect the skin from the effects of stress, UV and pollution.

The ingredient may also slow down the onset of cellular senescence, a natural process in which ageing skin cells stop dividing and lie dormant, disrupting other healthy cells and causing dryness and slackness in the skin. In fact, according to Thoby, "camellias have the characteristic of having no senescence program – genetically they are not programmed to die," which goes some way to explaining how they're perpetually regenerating themselves by producing new stems, leaves and flowers. "The more time passes, the more beautiful and strong the plant is," adds Thoby.

Crucially, N°1 de Chanel is also the house's first foray into clean beauty, which makes sense given Gajacq's impressive commitment to the power of nature. The formulas have sustainability front of mind; they are up to 97 per cent natural and use almost the entire camellia plant, including the petals, seeds that are pressed to obtain oil and even a type of yeast,

which helps to strengthen its barrier function.

Standouts in the N°1 de Chanel collection, which currently features nine products, include the highly concentrated Red Camellia Revitalizing Serum, an Eye Cream and a Powder-to-Foam Cleanser, which transforms on contact with water, thereby reducing planet-damaging emissions in the manufacturing process. Most products, including L'Eau Rouge – an elevated body mist infused with camellia water, jasmine, orange blossom and sparkling red fruits for a jolt of freshness – are made of recyclable glass, while the refillable jar of the Revitalizing Cream even has a cap composed of crushed camellia seed shells. For an effortlessly chic finishing touch, the foundation, enriched with smoothing red camellia oil, creates a second-skin effect; the lip and cheek balm a flirtatious flush.

Which brings us back to the camellia itself. The farm in Gajacq is Chanel's blank page to create a new type of heritage; one that has a tangible stake in the conservation of this flower and the surrounding countryside. But perhaps the camellia's limitless powers for regeneration is its greatest legacy of all and a nod to the many ways it will be reimagined in Chanel skincare for years to come. ■

1. Powder-to-Foam Cleanser, Dhs230
2. Revitalising Eye Cream, Dhs225
3. Revitalising Serum, Dhs495 for 30ml
4. Revitalising Cream, Dhs460
5. Revitalising Foundation, Dhs335
6. Revitalising Serum-In-Mist, Dhs365

