

Taiga Tea

Camellia exotica

This plant superficially resembles *Camellia sinensis* (the common tea plant), but it only grows in the Ural montane tundra/taiga region. The plant itself has leaves that are significantly more purple on the underside, and the plant does not increase in size past a certain point. *Camellia exotica* plants are also considerably hardier than 'regular' tea plants, and can survive in much more hostile conditions. It is not exactly an invasive species, but it grows well and fairly quickly.

No record of the plant appears before the end of 2013, and it only really became established widely in 2016. Medical researchers became aware of *Camellia exotica* very quickly, as such things go; when reports came in about a new medicinal 'Taiga Tea,' local health officials tested it. And then they called in the Russian Ministry of Health, who promptly called in the World Health Organization. This happened because Taiga Tea is, in fact, extremely medicinal; it's good for nausea, cuts down severely on calcium loss, boosts natural defenses against radiation (the plant itself is extremely radiation-resistant), is remarkably nutritious, and seems to give a short-term

boost to cognitive development without being a stimulant. *Camellia exotica* even tastes nice; mildly sweet, with a distinctive citrus flavor that does not overpower.

Right now the existence of *Camellia exotica* is classified to a fare-the-well, by the mutual agreement of every permanent member of the UN Security Council, plus every country with a functional space program. Not so much because of the tea itself, but because of its possible origins; *Camellia exotica*'s first appearance in a location quite near the 2013 Chelyabinsk meteor strike has not been overlooked. Nor has the fact that tea made from its leaves effectively treats a lot of the symptoms associated with free fall. All of which means there are a lot of foreign intelligence agents investigating the area around Chelyabinsk for 'oddities' right now. Some of them are even there with Russian permission.

But that's in Chelyabinsk. Wanting to go to, say, Tunguska is another matter. Now that the Russians know what to look for there, they'll be running the next expedition themselves. Whether the rest of the planet's intelligence agencies are willing to respect the Russians' hands-off attitude is, of course, an open question.

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