



**Good Practice Story Title:** Flower of Excellence: Welcome to Camélia

**Destination:** Celorico de Basto

**Country:** Portugal

**Submitting Organization:** Municipality of Celorico de Basto

**Category:**

- Destination Management
- Nature & Scenery
- Environment & Climate
- Culture & Tradition
- Thriving Communities
- Business & Marketing

**Destination description:**

Celorico de Basto is a small paradise located in the Terras de Basto region, in the North of Portugal. It is a picturesque rural area, with a total area of 181.1 km<sup>2</sup> and with a population of around 18 000 habitants, it is a peaceful place with its historical roots well established.

In this territory, the existing biodiversity is impressive, with its great variety of flora and fauna, thus providing breath taking natural landscapes.

In addition to its natural beauty, Celorico de Basto is rich in historical and cultural heritage. Its historic centre is a labyrinth of narrow streets and charming squares, where you can find ancient churches, manor houses and traditional granite buildings, testaments to its rich history, prior to the founding of the country in 1143 A.D.



In the story of Celorico de Basto the story of Portugal is told. The fortifications erected tell the story of the assertion of independence and nationality. The magnificent manors tell the story of the country's settlement and the times of a feudal system that lasted for centuries. It is also in these houses that the highest point in the history of a country with a small population and courageous and adventurous people is reflected, enclosing one of the greatest world powers of the time - Spain and the sea that has always exercised a fascination over the Portuguese, taking them discovering sea routes that no one else saw and discovering territories, continents that were not known. It is from this story of discoveries and exchange of knowledge and goods that camellias arrive in Portugal, on a path that brought them from the city of Porto to this special point, where the three ancient provinces of the country are located: Minho, Douro and Trás-os- Montes, resulting in an extraordinary transition zone where you can find the colours that mark this region: the green of Minho, the blue of the Douro, and the granite grey that marks the landscape of Trás-os-Montes.

In fact, the Camellias are the most emblematic feature of Celorico de Basto. Core elements in the traditional gardens of Basto, where they are distinguished by their topiary or the art of adorning the gardens, giving the plants different configurations and green sculptures. This village (known as the "Capital of Camellias®") is famous for its beautiful camellias, and the way they adorn the gardens, parks and farms, creating a colorful landscape, especially in winter. The tradition of cultivating camellias is deeply rooted in the local community, making them not just flowers, but true symbols of pride and identity for the inhabitants of Celorico de Basto.

Thus, Celorico de Basto is not just a tourist destination, as it is already a place distinguished by its beauty and rich cultural, natural and architectural heritage. No traveller who appreciates the beauties of art and nature will miss the peculiar character of the gardens that are often visible behind the walls guarding the secluded backyards of the manor houses from the prying eyes of passers-by. On the terraces and in the backyards, the planting trays almost disappear, drowned out by a profusion of green sculptures in which, alongside some curious geometric shapes carved out of boxwoods, yews and camellias, others of a stylized zoomorphic shape appear, sometimes perched on them, in marvellous plastic compositions. Examples of this beauty are the Fresco Houses, columns and rotundas, full of greenery, freshness and grandeur.



Visitors are invited to explore the stunning landscapes and history of its prime resource – Camellias and its stunning gardens.

### **Summary of Good Practice Story:**

Let's go back to the middle of the 19th century. At the time, the sisters, with the peculiar names Emília Ermelinda and Justina Praxedes, were living in England with their uncle, a representative of the Alto Douro Wine Company. In Her Majesty's land, they saw gardens worthy of fairy tales, populated by strange green “creatures”, some geometric, others bizarre. They were actually topiaries, monumental topiaries made by skilled English gardeners.

These old gardens, many from the late 17th and early 18th centuries, were inspired by French Baroque gardens and the designs of André Le Nôtre, author of the lavish gardens at the Palace of Versailles.

The Pinto Basto sisters would have been dazzled by such rare beauty and, when they returned to Portugal to get married, they decided to bring these “creatures” to life in Terras de Basto. Emília Ermelinda married José Pinto Dá Mesquita de Queiroz e Lemos, lord of Casa da Igreja and Quinta do Prado, both in Celorico de Basto, and her sister Justina Praxedes married Teodoro António de Carvalho e Almeida Leite Pereira, lord of Casa de Piellas, in Painzela, Cabeceiras de Basto.

From dream to reality. They called in their gardeners and instructed them to create these fabulous “creatures”.

Pruning vines and boxwoods was easy, but no one knew how to apply the art of topiary. D. Justina Praxedes had the idea to send her gardener Manuel Joaquim Alves Soares, whom she had taken into her home from the age of three, to study drawing in Porto.

Years later, an artist was born and gave life to the first “creatures” that populated the gardens of the Pinto Basto sisters' houses.

Yews, cedars and, of course, camellias, the magnificent camellias, also called japonicas or Chinese roses and queens of the Terras de Basto, were the raw material for the crazy “creatures”. And so the “Jardins de Basto” were born. On the one hand, formal and classic, marked by more or less geometric boxwood beds and, on the other, full of nooks and winding paths, in the English manner.



With the innovation of monumental topiaries! Here the architecture is green, developed on levels where the arcades form traffic circles and the arbours serve as fresco houses, where sculptures of fantastic, stylized animals wind around, creating a veritable bestiary. Only a prodigious mind could come up with these private gardens.

Beautiful “creatures” made up of oriental camellias that, from the fall, with their fragrant sasanqua, to the spring, when the japonicas paint these mysterious gardens white, pink and red, are hidden in the middle of nowhere, behind high granite walls, letting the monumental iron gates of the manor houses reveal a little of these wonders.

The Celorico Camellias bloomed in abundance, beautifying the gardens and public spaces with their wide variety of colors. They continue to do so, generation after generation, and these flowers continue to be an integral part of the landscape and identity of this community, it is even said that in every house in the region, there is at least one camellia, as a way of symbolizing its history. Most of these plants are reproduced by the residents themselves, however, in stately homes, camellias were taken to another dimension by art, dominating their gardens.

Over time, challenges have arisen to preserve this natural and cultural heritage. Tending gardens is expensive and few people know how to do it.

Faced with these challenges, the inhabitants of Celorico de Basto began to realize the importance of taking action to protect their camellias and their heritage. Aware of the need to preserve the natural beauty that surrounded them, they came together to promote environmental conservation and the appreciation of culture, as they wanted Celorico de Basto to be recognized not only for its beautiful camellias, but also for its good preservation practices. nature and promotion of local culture.

Thus, the Camellia Festival was born, an annual celebration dedicated to the preservation and promotion of these magnificent flowers and the environment that sustains them (their gardens), and a whole intangible heritage. The festival was not only an opportunity to admire the beauty of camellias, but also a space to raise awareness in the community about adopting more sustainable good practices.



During the festival, residents and visitors were invited to participate in various educational and cultural activities. Gardening workshops taught sustainable camellia growing techniques, while talks and exhibitions highlighted the region's rich history and biodiversity.

Over the years, the Camellia Festival has become a symbol of the Celorico de Basto community's commitment to preserving nature and local heritage and also an attraction for tourists from all over the world. Thus, thanks to this joint effort, camellias continue to flourish, and the beauty and cultural richness of this region are preserved for future generations.

And in this way, Celorico de Basto became an example of good practices in sustainability and cultural conservation. As a result of this, there are the awards and recognition that have received in favor of Celorico's camellias, making them a symbol of excellence.

### **Issues faced:**

Despite their captivating beauty and the significant role that Camellias played in local identity, their gardens were a growing concern, thus facing a silent threat that could compromise the future.

These Camellia gardens, although valuable, still did not receive due attention. The absence of specific legislation for its protection reflected the lack of public recognition of its true value.

The majority of these gardens belong to private entities, which gives them a modest presence, thus making it difficult for the public to recognize them and limiting the number of visits, that is, few visitors knew about them, and over time, these Gardens began to show signs of wear.

In addition to this, there is the economic aspect, since, due to a lack of financial support from public authorities, garden maintenance is unaffordable for owners. Even though owners began to realize that opening their properties to tourism could be a financial solution for preservation, it was essential that this management was carried out effectively.

However, even with the role of tourist activity, it is essential to raise awareness about the recognition of its value, as well as the dissemination and promotion of these spaces.



Thus, with effort and dedication, these unique and historic Camellia gardens can finally obtain the necessary recognition and protection.

### **Solution:**

Given the problems faced by Camellias gardens and the lack of adequate recognition and protection, clear initiatives and objectives have emerged to reverse this situation. Several solutions were implemented with the aim of valuing and preserving these unique spaces, boosting the local economy and promoting camellia as a vital cultural and economic resource, thus transforming the reality of camellia gardens in Celorico de Basto.

The great pioneering initiative to solve the problem faced was the development of an annual event that always takes place in the month of March (the month dedicated to Camellias), called the International Camellia Festival. This event attracts many visitors to the village and boosts local commerce. The festival mobilizes the entire local community, with one of the highlights being the parade that culminates in a grand battle of flowers, where the population actively participates in decorating the city's streets, creating a festive and welcoming environment. This year, it celebrated its 19th edition, which highlights its notoriety.

Furthermore, throughout this event, it is possible to attend an Exhibition/Contest of Camellias and Decorated Tables, which brings together exhibitors from various countries, such as Spain, Brazil and Peru, as well as local institutions that display their decorated tables. The exhibition is held over a weekend in the gardens of Quinta do Prado, where there are several attractions, including theater, fashion shows and stalls with local products, such as food, cosmetics and handicrafts.

### **Other activities developed to celebrate Camélia throughout the month of March are:**

- ➔ An exhibition with works and products by local artists, and several artistic workshops are held;
- ➔ Space for discussion about the importance of camellias (usually one of the opening activities), entitled "A conversation about Camellias – Natural and economic value";
- ➔ Election of the Princess, Royal Princess and Queen of Camellias, among many others.



Allied to all this, the camellia has also inspired the production of agri-food goods in the region, that is, some local producers have developed innovative products, such as infusions, jams, liqueurs and hygiene items based on camellia essential oils. These products not only diversify the local economy, but also promote camellia as a valuable resource.

Thus, with a combination of cultural events, exhibitions, community activities and agri-food innovation, Celorico de Basto has found effective ways to enhance and protect its camellia gardens, ensuring that they continue to be a vital and recognized part of the local heritage.

### **Methods, Steps, and Tools applied:**

In order to face the problems that affected the Camellia gardens and their own identity, several methods were adopted to transform the reality of the Camellia gardens in Celorico de Basto, thus guaranteeing their recognition and conservation for future generations.

The main strategies supported by two main vectors are: Camellias as a source of wealth generation and sustainable economic development and Camellias as an element of artistic inspiration are:

- ➔ Development of cultural events that promote this endogenous product, which results in the “International Camellia Festival” (an annual event that takes place in March, and which boosts local commerce and culture around camellias, attracting many visitors).
- ➔ Involvement of the local community, through their participation in some activities that were planned, such as: their active participation in decorating the streets during the festival and their fundamental role in the election of the Princess, Royal Princess and Queen of Camellias.
- ➔ Educational and artistic activities, such as:
  - Artistic Workshops and Exhibitions: During the month of March, exhibitions are held with works and products by local artists, in addition to various artistic workshops;
  - Discussion Sessions: "Talk about Camellias – Natural and economic value" which is an activity that addresses the importance of camellias.
- ➔ Production of Agri-food Goods.
- ➔ Theater and Fashion Shows: Activities carried out during the Exhibition/Contest that attract visitors and provide cultural entertainment.



- ➔ Local Product Stalls: selling food, cosmetics and handicrafts, which stimulates the local economy and promotes regional products.

Through these strategies, Celorico de Basto has managed to enhance and protect its camellia gardens, ensuring that they continue to be a vital and recognized part of the local heritage.

### **Achievements and Results:**

Celorico de Basto, through the strategy developed for the preservation of Camélia and its continuous promotion, consolidated its official recognition and local pride, as a city elected “Capital of Camellias”.

As a direct result of this movement, local producers began to explore new possibilities to integrate camellias into their products, such as: camellia infusions, jams and liqueurs, attracting both locals and tourists. These products, made with natural and local ingredients, not only highlight the cultural value of Camellias, but also contribute to the regional economy.

In addition to food products, the use of camellia essential oils gave rise to a line of cosmetics. Soaps, creams and other personal care products, all enriched with the benefits of camellia oils, have gained popularity for their quality and natural benefits to the skin. This innovation allowed local producers to diversify their offerings, reaching new markets and increasing their profits.

Success is also notable through the International Camellia Festival, with its exhibitions, competitions, workshops and cultural activities, not only promoting camellias, but also strengthening tourism and the local economy. The event attracts thousands of visitors, contributing to the global visibility of Celorico de Basto and the sustainable development of the region.

In short, Camélia not only flourished in the gardens of Celorico de Basto, but also in the markets and in the routines of the people who live in Celorico de Basto.

### **Lessons Learned and Advice:**





Celorico de Basto, became an example of good practices in environmental preservation and cultural appreciation, especially with the emblematic role of Camellias in the region. Some of the good practices adopted are highlighted below:

Creation of a world-class knowledge center and dissemination of knowledge about Camellias, through protocols carried out with Universities and schools reputable in the study of Biology, genetics and the arts of cultivation and gardening.

- ➔ Valorization of Natural and Cultural Heritage: The preservation and valorization of camellias in Celorico de Basto show the importance of recognizing and promoting local heritage. Camellias, with their vibrant colors, adorn gardens and parks, becoming a symbol of identity and pride for the community. This recognition boosted initiatives that included the granting of new products.
- ➔ Community Involvement in Preservation and Promotion: Community involvement was crucial to the success of events in Celorico de Basto. From planting and caring for the camellias to participating in events and festivals, the local community played an active role. This involvement ensured that conservation practices were sustainable and that economic and social benefits were shared.
- ➔ Holding Cultural and Educational Events: The Celorico de Basto International Camellia Festival is a brilliant example of how cultural events can boost tourism and the local economy. This annual festival celebrates the beauty and cultural importance of camellias, bringing together experts, horticulturists and enthusiasts from around the world. In addition to exhibitions and competitions, the festival includes workshops and cultural activities that educate and engage the community and visitors.
- ➔ Promotion of Sustainable Tourism: Celorico de Basto has become a desired destination for tourists interested in authentic experiences and high-quality local products. The development of tourist itineraries that include visits to camellia gardens, castles and monasteries, combined with the offer of products derived from camellias, has strengthened the local economy in a sustainable way.



- ➔ Investment in Education and Environmental Awareness: Environmental and cultural education has played a vital role in the success of Celorico de Basto, through educational programs in schools and gardening workshops that teach children and adults the importance of environmental preservation and cultural heritage. These initiatives ensure that future generations continue to value and protect their heritage.

Celorico de Basto has become an inspiring example of how valuing natural and cultural heritage can boost sustainable development. Through community involvement, the promotion of sustainable tourism and environmental education, the city has not only preserved its camellias, but also ensured a prosperous future for its inhabitants. The lessons learned in Celorico de Basto are a guide for other regions seeking to preserve nature and economic and social development.

## Recognitions and Additional References

The natural value of Celorico de Basto is visible even to the least attentive visitor. The history of the municipality includes a moment when the outlawed and murdered were sent to this territory to explore an impenetrable forest. Although the conditions for human life have been created, much of this natural heritage remains, in the mountains, in watercourses and in the fields. Coexistence with human beings took place in a harmonious way, combining the natural heritage with the built heritage, with the profusion of a large number of manors, religious buildings and a castle, a military fortification prior to the nationality that is one of the great symbols of the county. In recent years, the success of the International Camellia Festival has motivated political power to explore this enormous natural wealth of the municipality and the extraordinary way in which art and architecture have achieved a very appealing complex, pride of the local population and interesting for all those who visit it, resulting in a unique experience that combines a work of nature with the work of men and provides magnificent natural experiences, combined with the exploration of the senses based on the contemplation of landscapes, the gastronomic experience, the uniqueness of a "Vinho Verde" wine that It is unique in the world, unable to be reproduced anywhere else on the globe. In an increasingly equal world, Celorico de Basto is a small oasis of identity, culture and tradition that provides visitors with a unique experience.

