

Notes From Four Visits to Japanese Nurseries®

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FIRST VISIT

On my first trip to Japan some 8 or 9 years ago I attended the second IPPS Japan regional conference. The New Zealand IPPS Region had sponsored Japan joining the IPPS in 1993.

During the conference we visited Seagaia, a massive indoor tropical ocean park complete with white sand, surfable waves and young Japanese dressed in Hawaiian clothes. It was stunningly tropical; plants such as hibiscus, palms of all descriptions, and anthuriums filled the gardens. Further visits included a Mexican Cactus Garden. Members visiting Japan should include places such as these together with the Japanese Disneyland and historic temples and palaces — as well as the nurseries of course — to gain a full flavour of both historic and modern Japanese culture.

The Japanese plant use is outstanding. One nursery we visited grew large 15 to 20 m trees, mainly conifers. These are grown in the ground for a number of years and sold for major developments 2 to 3 years in advance. Once the trees have been sold ahead, Japanese nurserymen start the trenching process, which takes a couple of years. Trenching, root pruning and backfilling is done every 6 months or so. Prior to despatch the trunk and branches are wrapped firmly with hessian and treated with great care. Prices ranged around 1 million yen per tree, £4500.

SECOND VISIT

My second visit to Japan came after several Japanese members flew to a New Zealand IPPS conference and convinced me to go back. On the second visit my dear friend Shozo Watanabe showed me the real Japan, taking me to places such as Kyoto, Nara and Nagoya to see shrines, temples, and the Shogun palaces.

We also toured many of the growing areas and viewed a wide range of nursery activities.

One nursery we visited specialised in open-ground production of *Nandina*, a member of the *Berberis* family often sold as “dwarf Japanese bamboo” or “heavenly bamboo” because the leaves strongly resemble bamboo. It is used extensively in Japanese gardens both in Japan and elsewhere.

The plants were being grown in rows about 30 cm apart with barely room to walk between. The colour and shape were outstanding given that they were spaced only 15 cm apart in the rows.

The same grower also produced conifers for the bonsai gift market. To reach saleable size faster these were also grown in the field and 5 to 6 weeks before despatch they were lifted and potted into shallow trays as instant bonsai.

THIRD VISIT

On the third visit I accompanied Commercial Horticulture editor Bob Edwards to Omaio, the home of bonsai, a district north of Tokyo. Here we visited eight of the top bonsai producers of the world and were privileged to be taken behind the scenes to see their private collections and contemplation gardens.

The collections included some really old gnarled trees hundreds of years old as well as younger, smaller specimens, bamboos, and grasses. Also impressive were groups of the same varieties in garden and natural settings in trays ranging in size from a few centimetres diameter to a metre across and vertical slabs a metre high.

Groundcovers are very popular in Japan, there are several large specialist growers producing millions of plants annually exclusively for the Japanese market. The range includes ivies, sasa bamboos and mondo grass and we saw a dwarf cultivar of this only millimetres high that may replace conventional grass in patio and courtyard gardens in New Zealand.

As in many other countries, a huge amount of nursery production comes from many small growers — in Japan's case producing as few as 500 to 1000 plants in the corners of fields. Everywhere you go you see growers specialising in 10 or 20 varieties, often conifers, producing semi-mature plants between 2 and 3 m high, perhaps between 5 and 10 years old.

My first impression of Japan had been of the Americanisation of the big cities so it was a pleasant surprise to see that almost every home garden was a traditional Japanese garden. I was also amazed that the Japanese are such enthusiastic container gardeners: there are pot plants everywhere, even spilling out of gardens and courtyards onto the roadside, and they don't appear to have a pilfering problem.

One of the main impressions of Japanese nurseries that I have visited over the years is that tidiness is not one of their main traits but the quality and presentation of stock leaving the nursery is second to none. The quality of the nursery stock on the auction floor, where the majority of plants are sold, is mind-boggling. So is the quantity. At one market where the trolleys were numbered the highest number I saw was 16,700. Ninety per cent of these are filled on the Sunday afternoon and evening and are all sold and away to their destination by the Monday afternoon.

FOURTH VISIT

My fourth visit, in July 2001, was to the Mikano Botanical Garden in the city of Koche.

Makino was a dedicated self-taught plantsman back in the 18th Century and the gardens were established in his honour. They cover some 20 to 25 ha and house a very large collection including some rare Japanese taxa, such as a large range of the early varieties of hydrangea, large-leaved magnolia, and deciduous camellias.

Japan's horticultural philosophy is unique, the attention to detail is amazing and Western gardening and nursery production would be much the richer by adopting some of their cultivation techniques. If you get the chance to go, don't hesitate to take it.