

## Nurseries in Japan: a 20 Minute Tour<sup>©</sup>

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### INTRODUCTION

For the month of February 2012, my time at the Kosugi Garden Seminar, Atami City, Japan, was well spent in an intensive learning experience that I would recommend to professionals interested in Japanese gardening history and techniques. Partnering with the European Landscape Association, the “in English” session drew participants from around the world. Dr. Andreas Hamacher developed this course which he conducts fluidly by moving between in English, German, Japanese, and Chinese. The third week focused on hands-on demonstrations of maintenance, nursery operations, and nursery tours which will be the focus for this 20 min photography tour. <[http://kosugi-zohen.co.jp/seminar\\_top.htm](http://kosugi-zohen.co.jp/seminar_top.htm)>.

### WHOLESALE YARDS IN SAITAMA

While driving through the region, it seems that everyone for miles has trees being trained for resale in their yards for a Dr. Seuss-like view (Fig. 1). Wholesale yards in Saitama carry a wide range of woody plants that would be familiar to Americans in bare-root, B&B, and containers but they might be characterized as having extreme forms. Bare-root trees of 2½-in. caliper are stacked in houses with only 12 in. of root. Perfect root balls are artistically wrapped with the number of rope passes around relating to the value of the tree. Huge containers may hold 100-year-old black pines (*Pinus thunbergii*) for years as they continue to be meticulously trained into specific forms before sale. Shipping these trees overseas requires dipping the root balls in a proprietary mix for nematodes. These burlapped root balls are then packed into a plastic container with sterile soil for 1 month and tested for nematodes presence again before shipping.



Fig. 1. A typical wholesale yard in Saitama.

## ŌMIYA BONSAI VILLAGE

Ōmiya Bonsai Village (大宮盆栽村 *Ōmiya Bonsai-mura*) is the nickname for the bonsai nursery precinct in Bonsai-chō (盆栽町 *Bonsai-chō*), Kita-ku, Saitama, Japan.

I was there to visit the Omiya Bonsai Art Museum, opened in 2010, but when the demonstration went a bit long for a book signing, we were left with only 20 min to visit just one nursery. There were rows of tables with hundreds of trees both on the tables and crowding the ground below. Two tables displayed heaps of small pots for shohin, literati and other variants below 8 in. while larger pots were primarily stacked on the ground. Unlike the garden bonsai nurseries, this urban, walled, display yard of maybe 2,000 SF was completely set on paving and crushed stone allowing for a very clean environment. The Omiya Bonsai Nursery, Mansei-en is shown below (Fig. 2)



Fig. 2. Omiya Bonsai Nursery, Mansei-en.

## VIEWING PRUNING WORK FROM A CAR WINDOW

It was hard to drive along and not stop everywhere to admire the pruning work (Fig. 3) but there was one section of road with particularly impressive trees. We were delighted to find that it was our next demonstration nursery stop where we would see decades of expertise displayed in the field. This third generation pruning master showed us a very extreme method of garden bonsai involving driving a sharp tool through a branch in order to rotate it 180°. Large tree branches can be trained in a shorter time using the technique to achieve the desired form thereby increasing its resale value. He also trained hundreds of S-curved trees with a bamboo and rope system-something we would spend a couple hours doing ourselves. Learning his knot-tying system proved the most difficult aspect for some while visualizing the required pruning before attaching the structure eluded others.



Fig. 3. Viewing nurseries from the car window.

#### **SAIEN GARDEN AND AUCTION WAREHOUSE**

Saien Garden and Auction Warehouse (Fig. 4) (across the street) was definitely the place we were all curious to visit because this type of supply system to landscapers is not common to other countries. The massive warehouse buildings might seem familiar but the display yard is another story. Deciduous trees, pines, stone, sculptures, and anything required to complete a Japanese garden is held here for auction. As some trees are developed before resale so very experienced professionals are at hand to work the pieces and create displays. Some unusual techniques were sculpting deadwood from a crapemyrtle with a chainsaw and ridging the crane lift of a three-ball garden bonsai into place for a display garden. For example, the gentleman giving us a black pine pruning lesson worked here as a fun thing to do after retiring from teaching bonsai.



Fig. 4. The wholesale auction yard.

#### **NURSERY AT SHIBAMICHI HONTEN IN SAITAMA**

Last, we will focus on the nursery and grafting work at Shibamichi Honten in Saitama (Fig. 5). It was a torrential downpour but we did our best to keep up with him and our translator between the Japanese, German, English, and Swiss explanations. Everything in the yard and the houses was interesting but his immediate work included grafting magnolias, including some shipments from the Raulston Arboretum. His planting style for these was to pack a plastic crate with about 200 bare root trees into a seed-starter type mix, moisten it, and wrap it with plastic before sliding it under the table. Grafted pieces are on the tables, tagged, plastic bagged, and individually potted. Many tags in the nursery are in English as well as Japanese. The sales yard of popular conifers was joined by shrubs that were thought lost to the trade. He wishes to save historic garden specimens even though they may not be profitable. When sticking cuttings, planting medium is mixed and potting trays are filled by hand. Mr. Shibamichi stops to point out a recent project, the Raulston's "Connoisseur Plant" grown from seed, *Magnolia fordiana*. A current project involves multiple crosses to create a *Mahonia* for the cut-flower market. To better understand his life's work we have some green tea and biscuits in a meeting room to dry off perusing stacks of photographs with his decades of plant introductions.



Fig. 5. Hybridizer Akira Shibamichi.

