



Hama-rikyu Gardens, March 2019

The Gardens of Tokyo

- Another account of two gardeners exploring Japanese gardens -

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On the way back from Tohoku (described in our other account *1), we had time to visit several gardens in Tokyo before returning to the U.K. Our guide was Dr. Kikuchi from the Tokyo Metropolitan Parks Association, the body responsible for the management of Tokyo's green spaces (*2). We were hopeful we would catch sight of some cherry blossoms, we had been a little too early to see any in the north, so when we arrived back in Tokyo towards the end of March 2019, we felt fortunate to see some cherry trees starting to flower, it was a beautiful thing to experience on this trip.

Garden in Tokyo

Several gardens in central Tokyo are important remaining examples of stroll gardens from the Edo period (1603-1868). Created by important families of the day as places for recreation, to entertain guests and in some cases were also used for hunting. A path that leads visitors around the garden with carefully selected points to pause and admire the finest views are a feature of stroll gardens, as are ponds, islands, bridges and artificial hills. Each garden has its own unique character and story. Today they are open for all to enjoy and are managed both as important historic sites and spaces for visitors to relax in the beautiful surroundings.

Of the nine major gardens managed by Dr. Kikuchi and his team, we had the chance to visit four. We would like to give a brief introduction to each garden.



Hama-rikyu Gardens, March 2019



300-year old pine, Hama-rikyu, March 2019



Rapeseed flowering, Hama-rikyu Gardens, March 2019

1. Hama-rikyu Garden

The first garden we visited was Hama-rikyu Garden, from the Edo period, which is designated a Special Place of Scenic Beauty and Special Historic Site. We were immediately struck by the juxtaposition of the old garden and the modern skyscrapers at the boundaries of the garden. Our guide said he often observed that westerners are surprised by this contrast and enjoy photographing it, whereas Japanese people are not so fond of the closeness of the buildings towering over their city's gardens. As we began to get used to the unusual view, we could start to focus on the garden itself, and spent time admiring its ponds, teahouses, bridges, and plants. Hama-rikyu was the family garden of the Tokugawa Shogun (*3) for many generations, and the garden once served as the shoguns' duck hunting grounds. Hama-rikyu has been open to the public since 1946, and at 23 hectares, it is the biggest garden of its kind in Tokyo.

There are some very fine trees in this garden, with 200 pine trees including the magnificent 300-year-old pine (pictured above). Another impressive tree, which neither of us had encountered before, is tabunoki (*Machilus thunbergii*). A large evergreen tree in the laurel family, which can grow to 30 metres in the warm temperate forests of southern Japan where it naturally occurs. Its red-brown heartwood is valued in making furniture and musical instruments, and its aromatic bark has been used to make incense for centuries in Japan. There is a beautiful specimen here at Hama-rikyu.

An interesting feature of Hama-rikyu is the lock and stile system that draws seawater from Tokyo Bay into the garden's ponds; this is the only remaining example of this from the Edo period in Tokyo. As we walked around the garden, the character changed as more water flowed in from the harbour and filled ponds and waterways.

A flower we were surprised to encounter was rapeseed, with thousands of plants in bloom creating a vibrant field of yellow. There are changing floral displays to enjoy throughout spring and summer in the garden.



View of Koishikawa Korakuen Gardens, March 2019

2. Koishikawa Korakuen Gardens

Dating from 1629, this stroll garden is the oldest garden in Tokyo, and has been designated a Special Place of Scenic Beauty as well as a Special Historic Site. Just through the gate, we could see the first soft pink blooms of the cherry trees. This garden has a winding path leading across a pond with a low bridge, followed by stepping-stones; the path then climbs, crossing back across via a bright red bridge that comes to a viewing point. From the top of an artificial mound named Sho-Rozan, you can view most of the garden. In another area of the garden, a wonderful stone bridge stands, known as the Full-Moon Bridge, as its reflection forms a perfect circle in the water. Famous views from the countryside of both Japan and China have been replicated in miniature at Koishikawa Korakuen.



View from a bridge at Koishikawa Korakuen, March 2019



Wisteria trellis, Koishikawa Korakuen Gardens, March 2019

There is an area dedicated to ume or plum blossom, which comes into flower earlier than cherry blossom. Winding paths lead you through informal woodland areas and red bridges cross streams and rock formations. There is also a large iris garden, an impressive wisteria trellis, and a rice field.



Pine pruning at Koishikawa Korakuen, March 2019

Pine trees are an important feature of the garden and we happened to be there while a team were pruning them. It is fascinating to watch, and with the help of our guide, we were able to talk to the gardeners to glean tips about pine pruning. They were carrying out the momiage stage of pine pruning which involves thinning out needles by carefully removing them by hand. We learned that for a medium-sized pine tree, it would take two of these highly skilled gardeners a full day to prune.

While here, we also learned another part of the annual maintenance specific to the Japanese red pine (*Pinus densiflora*), which involves polishing the branches with a sasara brush made of bamboo to remove the oldest and darkest bark, revealing the fresh red younger bark beneath.



People enjoying the weeping-cherry at Rikugien Gardens, March 2019

3. Rikugien Garden

We arrived at Rikugien Garden on a fairly overcast, chilly day – however, there were quite a lot of people here. Just beyond the entrance of the garden, it became clear why, as we saw a huge, magnificent weeping cherry almost in full bloom; its snowy, light pink to white blossoms were a sight to behold.

The garden was built in 1702 and is a Special Place of Scenic Beauty. The garden is famous for its recreation in miniature of 88 scenes from Japanese poems (waka). There was once a small granite marker by each viewpoint, though just 32 remain today, and it was once a test to see how well-read guests were if they could recognise the scene and poem it belonged to. Some of these small gardens were incredible and made us wish we were more knowledgeable on Japanese poetry. Like many gardens, this one has night-time illuminations in spring for the cherry trees, and in autumn for the maples and other autumn colour.



View over Rikugien Gardens, March 2019



Tea house made from rhododendron wood, March 2019



Togetsukyo bridge, March 2019



Stachyurus praecox flowering, March 2019

A winding path through a woodland garden takes you to a wonderful teahouse made from rhododendron wood which dates from the Meiji period (1868-1912). Another fine feature is a beautiful stone bridge named Togetsukyo. This garden has many rhododendrons which flower between April and early June, though a few flowers were starting to open in late March giving us a glimpse of the colours that would appear in the garden in just a few weeks. One shrub we did catch in full flower was kibushi (*Stachyurus praecox*), this species is endemic to Japan and has beautiful yellow flowers hanging from its bare branches in late winter.

There is a 35-metre man-made hill where one can enjoy fine views across the garden. Viewpoints are an important part of a Japanese garden, and benches are also an integral feature for people to sit and appreciate the view before them.



View over Rikugien Gardens, March 2019

Dr. Kikuchi explained that the nine gardens managed by his team at Tokyo Metropolitan Parks Association have two faces; they are both urban parks and cultural properties. The spaces are used for recreation, and yet they are also hugely significant historic and cultural sites and must be managed appropriately for both purposes. Much research is carried out using old archives for the purpose of restoration and repairing historic features to protect the concept of how each garden was made. Detailed records of all restoration and maintenance work carried out are made for future generations.



Pond at Kiyosumi Gardens, March 2019

4. Kiyosumi Garden

The final garden we visited in Tokyo was Kiyosumi Garden where we were kindly shown around by Mr. Takahashi from the Garden Society of Japan. Kiyosumi Garden is a stroll garden established by the founder of the Mitsubishi group, a business conglomerate, in 1880 by renovating a garden formerly owned by feudal lords in the Edo period. In 1932, the Mitsubishi group donated the garden to the city.

At the heart of the garden is a large pond, with many pines at its edge, some sweeping out over the water. There is a fine wood-and-earth bridge, a stepping-stone crossing, and overhanging the water is a magnificent teahouse. There are rocks throughout the garden that were brought from all over Japan; it is interesting to see all the different colours and textures.

After the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, many fires broke out across the city, and thousands of local people took refuge in the garden. The large pond and many trees gave protection from the fire. The shelter of the garden saved as many as 10,000 lives. It was deeply moving to hear the role of Kiyosumi Garden in saving so many lives in 1923 and it was hard to comprehend what had happened in the beautiful and peaceful surroundings where we were standing. Almost 100 years later, there is a worry that this important part of the garden's history is in danger of being forgotten; the importance of storytelling was mentioned by our guide, in order to keep the memory of this event alive.



Kiyosumi Gardens, March 2019



Lesson in knot tying at Kiyosumi Gardens, March 2019

While visiting gardens in Japan we noticed the great attention to detail given to each aspect of the garden. One example that was highlighted while visiting Kiyosumi Gardens was takegaki (bamboo fencing), and the rope work seen in all Japanese gardens for tying the bamboo fences. First originating in the Heian period, many styles of bamboo fences are seen across Japan. We learned that they have a lifespan of seven years on average, and all trainee gardeners are taught the traditional skills needed for making these fences, including knot-tying.

Something we particularly appreciated while visiting all these gardens in Tokyo were the garden maps (*4), which all have a chart of plants that may be found in the garden, along with their corresponding flowering period. It is a good way of letting visitors know what they might see and helping them identify the flowers they do see.



Pine trees near Imperial Palace, Tokyo, March 2019

5. In the city

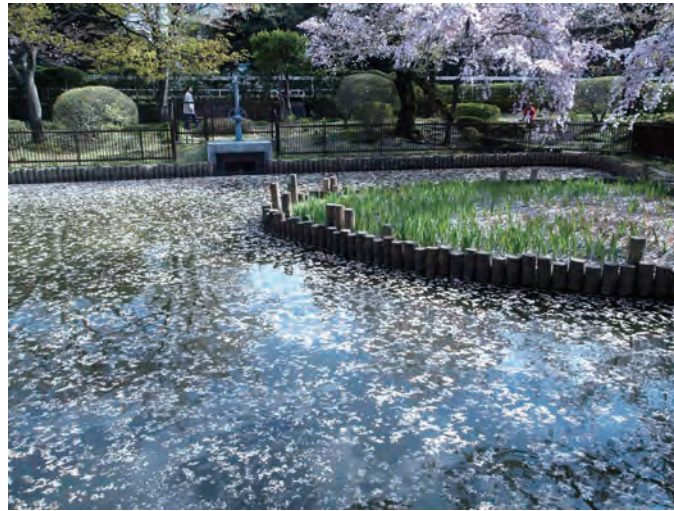
Beyond the gardens of Tokyo many trees and plants can be enjoyed while walking in the city. In Omotesando, a broad avenue is lined with many keaki trees (*Zelkova serrata*). This grand avenue was designed to lead visitors to the Meiji Shrine (*5) built in 1915, and today it is home to many high-end fashion boutiques. Another fine view of trees in the city centre is found in the square outside the Imperial Palace, where hundreds of pine trees grow and are pruned in the traditional Japanese way.



Flowers in pavement, Tokyo, March 2019

In Japan and especially Tokyo, space for the average person to grow plants is extremely limited, and when walking through the towns and cities it is both interesting and inspiring to see the clever ways people have made use of the available space, often with pots of flowers or small trees outside windows and doorways. In Tokyo we saw this colourful example of bringing flowers into people's lives in the centre of the city.





Closing

In Japan, viewing the beauty of the cherry blossoms in spring and the changing colours in autumn is a special way that gardens bring people together to appreciate nature and the glory of the changing seasons.

One of the great joys of being a gardener is spending time in the garden all year round and noticing all the subtle changes occurring daily, though as a visitor to a garden, the fleeting glimpse we catch of the garden is like a snapshot of that moment in time. We felt very lucky to catch the start of the cherry blossom season, as well as the many other things we saw; yet anytime to visit a garden is worthwhile as on any given day there is something special to experience as long as we keep our senses open.

During our trip to Japan we have had the good fortune to visit gardens in both Tohoku and Tokyo. We have learned from each garden and developed our understanding and appreciation of Japanese gardens, from the ancient Mitsuji of the Heian period, to the great Edo period stroll gardens in Tokyo, to the peaceful Great East Japan Earthquake Memorial Garden created in 2013.

In Tokyo we were reminded how storytelling has been important in the past, and writers and poets such as Bashō, a famous Haiku master, are remembered through their stories in gardens today. Storytelling is still just as important in the present day; we learned how Kiyosumi Garden saved so many lives after the earthquake in 1923, and there is a worry that this important part of the garden's history may be forgotten. Sharing these stories with visitors can help raise understanding and appreciation of a garden.

This reminded us of the tradition of kataribe (storytelling), which we had learned about in Tohoku, being used today to keep the memory of the Great East Japan Earthquake alive.

A unifying theme which has resonated strongly and unexpectedly on this trip is the role of people in gardens. As gardeners in a botanic garden we are often focussed on plants without much time spent considering the human element of gardens. But through the stories we have heard in Japan, we are reminded that people have both created and shaped gardens and have always been at the heart of their unique story, both past and present. This we feel has been an invaluable lesson which we will take back with us to our work at Kew Gardens.



Biography

Fran Culverhouse

Arboretum Nursery Supervisor at Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. Began at Kew Gardens in 2002 as a Horticultural Apprentice, and later became a Botanical Horticulturist in the Arboretum and spent time maintaining the Japanese Landscape. Strong interest in temperate woody plants and in conifers.

Jake Davies-Robertson

Botanical Horticulturist at Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. Started as a Horticultural Apprentice in 2011, and upon graduating became a member of the Arboretum staff at Kew, taking on the role of maintaining the Japanese Landscape. He has a strong passion for conifers and Asiatic flora.

Appendix / Information

- *1 The Gardens and Landscape of Tohoku
An account of two gardeners exploring north eastern Japan
https://doc.japan-insights.jp/pdf/JIN_TOPIC_20200511153448.pdf
- *2 The Tokyo Metropolitan Parks Association
[https://www.tokyo-park.or.jp/profile/#googtrans\(en\)](https://www.tokyo-park.or.jp/profile/#googtrans(en))
- *3 The Edo period/Tokugawa Shogun
<https://topics.japan-insights.jp/#edoartandculture> <https://topics.japan-insights.jp/#wadokei>
- *4 Let's go to the gardens
<https://www.tokyo-park.or.jp/teien/en/download/index.html>
- *5 The Meiji period/ The Meiji Shrine
<https://topics.japan-insights.jp/#symbolofmodernjapan> <https://topics.japan-insights.jp/#beingmodern>

People

Dr. Kikuchi Masayoshi, Tokyo Metropolitan Park Association
Mr. Takahashi Yasuo, The Garden Society of Japan
Mr. Kitamura Hitoshi, Kiyosumi Gardens, Tokyo Metropolitan Park Association



Web-Sites
japan-insights
<https://www.japan-insights.jp>