



View from the Great Japan Earthquake Memorial Garden, March 2019

The Gardens and Landscape of Tohoku

- An account of two gardeners exploring north eastern Japan -

Jake Davies-Robertson and Fran Culverhouse, U.K.

Japan is famous for its beautiful gardens. Visitors from around the world come to experience them, and many are drawn to the most famous gardens of Kyoto or Tokyo. The area of north-eastern Japan, called Tohoku, also has a rich garden heritage, yet is less well known to many international visitors.

Tohoku came to the world's attention in March 2011, when it experienced a powerful earthquake and tsunami referred to in Japan as 3.11, or the Great East Japan Earthquake. It caused major devastation to the region, most notably to its coastal towns and villages. Many lives were lost.

In March 2019, we from Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew travelled to Tohoku. We explored the region's gardens, from a new garden created in memory of the lives lost in 3.11, to an ancient UNESCO world heritage site garden with hundreds of years of history.

We discovered the natural beauty of Tohoku, for which it is famous in Japan, and visited some of its important cultural sites, learning about the rich history of the region along the way. We also visited parts of the region that were badly affected by 3.11, and saw some of the regeneration work taking place along Tohoku's eastern coast.



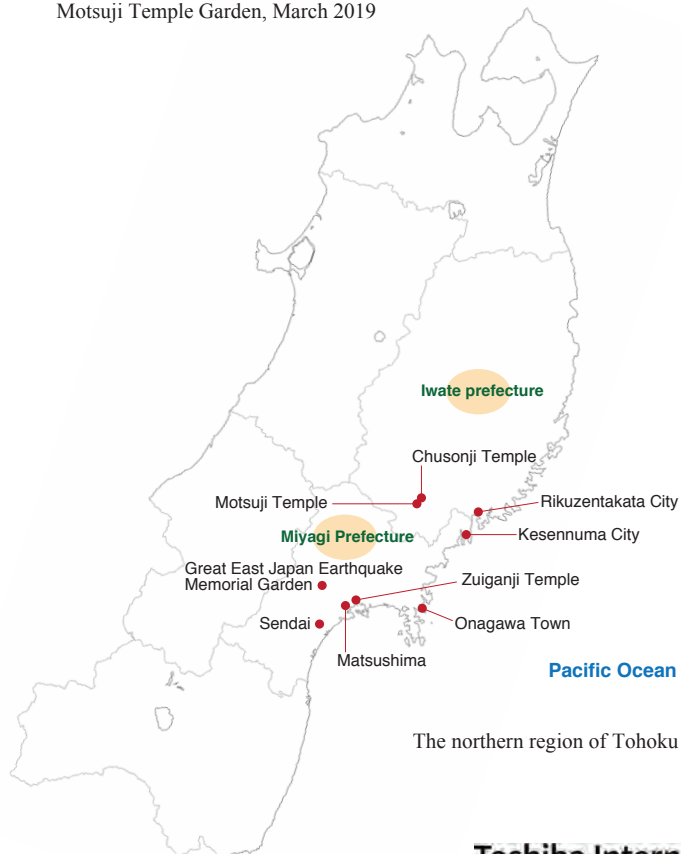
Great East Japan Earthquake
Memorial Garden, March 2019



Reconstruction work in
Tohoku, March 2019



Motsuji Temple Garden, March 2019



Although we had both previously visited Japan, neither of us had ventured to the region of Tohoku. This trip was an opportunity to see gardens away from the busier sites, and learn about this less-visited region.

It is always a great pleasure to meet with fellow gardeners and having the opportunity to work with Japanese gardeners, and to explore gardens with them was a unique experience; one which we feel helped us connect with the kokoro, or heart, of Japanese gardens. Tohoku has some wonderful gardens and incredible landscapes. We hope to share our experiences of the region, particularly in Miyagi and Iwate prefectures.

Introduction to Tohoku

Before beginning our account, we will briefly introduce Tohoku, which lies in the northeast of Japan's largest island, Honshu. It covers 66,952 km and is comprised of 6 prefectures: Akita, Aomori, Fukushima, Iwate, Miyagi and Yamagata.

Tohoku has a long coastline that stretches from the Japan sea on the west, across the top of Honshu and down the Pacific Ocean on its eastern coast. Volcanoes, mountains, forests, lakes and hot springs all feature in the landscape of this region.

The region is less developed, less populated, and more remote than the rest of Honshu. The climate is cooler and less humid than the south and west, and winters are cold, though not as severe as those of Hokkaido, which lies to the north.

The marked variation in climate across Japan affects both flowering time of plants and autumn colour of the deciduous trees. In springtime, the sakura ,cherry blossom, comes into flower first in the warmer south and west and then travels east across Japan, flowering last in the cooler northeast. Hanami ,flower viewing, is enjoyed across Japan in spring, and we hoped we might be able to experience this special time during our trip.



Japanese garden

When you think of a Japanese garden, what comes into your mind? Perhaps rocks and gravel, water and bridges, stone lanterns and basins, and plants such as azaleas, pine trees, and moss.

These elements often do feature, and together form the distinct character of a Japanese garden that has evolved during the country's long gardening history. Japan has a diverse and stunning natural landscape, and nature has always been the primary influence on its gardens. Each period throughout the country's rich history has further influenced how its gardens have developed.



Timeline of periods in Japanese history and brief outline of their influence on Japanese gardens

Pre-Nara: Shinto and a reverence for nature, large rocks, and trees.

Nara: 710-794. Naturalistic shorelines and stonework, minimalistic with influences from Buddhism and mainland Asia.

Heian: 794-1192. Palace and temple gardens. Lakes, winding streams, and bridges. The height of influence from the Emperor, Buddhism, and Taoism.

Kamakura and Muromachi: 1192-1573. Shogun influence, Zen Buddhism spreading throughout.

Momoyama: 1573-1603. Tea ceremony influence, with more enclosed forest-path-like gardens.

Edo: 1603-1868. Large strolling-gardens, with multiple scenes or changing scenery throughout.

Meiji: 1868-1912. Some western influences, continuing to the present, with modern gardens in traditional styles.

Plants in Japanese garden

Japan is home to a wonderfully rich native flora with approximately 7,000 native species, in comparison less than 3,000 species are native to the UK. Around 2,900 of Japan's native plants are also endemic, found only in Japan. With such great diversity, it is easy to understand why most Japanese gardens use only native plants.

Many Japanese natives are highly prized horticulturally and have become familiar garden plants around the world, including momiji or Japanese maple (*Acer palmatum*), kobushi or northern Japanese magnolia (*Magnolia kobus*), mitsumata or paperbush (*Egdeworthia chrysantha*) and yatsude or glossy-leaf paper plant (*Fatsia japonica*).

Alongside influences on design and the plants used in a Japanese garden, the other constant factor that exists in all gardens is their human story. Each garden has a unique story, and this is something that became very evident to us during our time in Japan, and is a subject we will explore further in our account.



View from grounds of Sendai Castle, March 2019

1. Sendai

A 100-minute train ride on the Tohoku Shinkansen, bullet train, from Tokyo Station took us to Sendai, the capital of Miyagi prefecture and the largest city of Tohoku, with over 1 million inhabitants.

Our first stop was Sendai castle. The ruins are all that remains of the castle built in 1602 by daimyo Date Masamune, who in 1600 chose Sendai, then a village, to be his capital. A statue of Date Masamune, a leader and warrior, stands in the castle grounds, depicting him on horseback wearing his distinctive helmet with a crescent moon. There are fine views from the castle grounds across the city and to the mountains beyond.



Statue of Date Masamune



Fuki (*Petasites japonicus*)

We saw our first wildflower of the trip here, fuki (*Petasites japonicus*), which is in the daisy family (*Asteraceae*), emerging from the ground, and our host informed us that the young flower buds are a popular tempura dish.

Driving through Sendai, we admired the street trees which, across Japan, are cared for and pruned in a unique and beautiful way. The city of Sendai is nicknamed Mori no Miyako, City of Trees, and among the trees lining its streets are many keaki (*Zelkova serrata*), which is in the elm family (*Ulmaceae*) and is the official tree of this region. During winter in Japan, you may notice straw mats tied around some trees; this is called kom-maki, and is a way of protecting the tree from damaging insects. The insects come down from the tree's canopy and take shelter in the matting over winter. The straw is then removed and burned before they become active again in spring.

Sendai was the largest city affected by 3.11, and the first garden we visited was created in response to the disaster.



Great East Japan Earthquake Memorial Garden, March 2019

2. Great East Japan Earthquake Memorial Garden

In Miyatoko village, to the north of Sendai, is the Great East Japan Earthquake Memorial Garden. It lies in a peaceful, rural setting at the foot of a hill, surrounded by forest and with a mountain range opposite. The site is sacred land that has been home to the Kakushouji Temple for over 300 years. The residing monk led a ceremony at the beginning of the project to bless both the place and all the people involved.

Our hosts were Mr. Kikuchi, Mr. Takahashi, and members of the Miyagi branch of the Garden Society of Japan. They explained that work started on the garden in June 2013, and has continued in stages since then. Before describing the garden, it is important to highlight three unique elements: the purpose, the people and the materials.

Purpose

The idea to make the garden was born in response to 3.11 by members of the Miyagi branch of the Garden Society of Japan. Created as a memorial for those who lost their lives, and to create a peaceful space for all those affected to come and spend time, it is also seen as a token of regeneration.

People

A small team of master gardeners or niwashi and craftsmen led and guided the project. They were joined by thousands of volunteers all wishing to give their time, energy, and support to help with the creation of the garden. Over the course of five years, more than 3,500 people volunteered. Many local people were involved, while others came from further afield in Japan, and some people even travelled from overseas to be part of this special project.



Great East Japan Earthquake Memorial Garden, March 2019

Materials

In the weeks and months following 3.11, rocks, stone, and materials including lanterns, were brought from those places affected by 3.11 and reclaimed for use in the memorial garden. Objects recovered from the rubble were given a new home in the memorial garden.

There is a special atmosphere felt in this garden, created by the three elements described above. It was a privilege to meet the gardeners here and hear how they built the garden. The garden they have created is not only very beautiful, but also a place of great peacefulness and serenity.

The Garden

The garden covers 4 hectares, though feels larger as it uses the technique of borrowed scenery, making the most of the beautiful landscape which lies beyond the garden. A path leads you around a pond where the fine view has been framed by the large open window of the wooden shelter, a place to rest, and on a still day to admire the reflections in the mirror-like water.

It is clear to see the skill and craftsmanship that has gone into creating each feature of the garden. One feature that we particularly admired was the traditional earthen bridge leading to an island in the main pond, made by laying logs from the base of the bridge, then bark of sugi (*Cryptomeria japonica*), then earth – on which moss is encouraged to grow.



Many of the trees growing in the garden were carefully selected and transplanted from the mountain which the garden sits at the foot of. This is a common practice in Japan, and perhaps for this reason, the trees look perfectly at home, as if they have been growing here for many years already. The plants include mansaku or witch hazel (*Hamamelis japonicus*), tsubaki or camellia (*Camellia japonica*), hananoki or Japanese red maple (*Acer pycnanthum*), and katsura (*Cercidiphyllum japonicum*).



Western eyes

To western eyes, this garden has many aspects we may expect to see in a Japanese garden, such as water, bridges, and lanterns. Our hosts, however, explained that it is not a traditional design, and being in a region far from the more historic gardens, such as in Kyoto, gives them greater freedom in their design and allows the flexibility to mix modern and traditional elements.

A quote from one of the master gardeners who founded this garden is 'make a garden, make a poem'. He explained that creating a garden is an expression of one's personality through their work, in the same way poets or artists such as Picasso have done. But as with Picasso, first the basics must be learned and then mastered over many years, and for this reason, an important aspect of the garden is to pass on skills to the next generation of gardeners.

The experienced gardeners leading the project decided early on that building the garden would be an opportunity to train student gardeners. Japan is facing similar difficulties as many other countries, including the U.K., in recruiting young people to the profession. This project has brought together young trainee gardeners from across Japan to learn traditional skills and be part of a project that has given them valuable practical experience.

Students have helped to build traditional structures in the garden, including stepping-stones and a shishi-odoshi or sozu (bamboo deer scarer). Students and volunteers also helped to plant the carpet of moss, which was held down using sand until it had rooted; as well as wind lifting the newly laid moss, it was also at risk of disturbance from the local wild pigs and crows.

One of the highlights of our time in Tohoku was the teaching we received in the memorial garden.



Pine pruning lesson, March 2019

We did not know what to expect when we were told we would be working in the garden – perhaps weeding, leaf raking, maybe cutting back some herbaceous perennials – of which we did some, though most of our time was being shown and then asked to prune camellias, Pieris, junipers, and pines. It was a pleasure to watch masters at work, but then to try and imitate was nerve-wracking. Our teachers told us that the current generations are more relaxed than previous, however they worry that power tools may lead to the loss of some of the traditional pruning techniques, such as tamamono, or ball shaping, often seen with azalea or junipers.

Pine pruning in Japan has two stages: midori-tsumi and momiage. The purpose of midori-tsumi is for shaping the tree. Each spring, when the new shoots have developed, they are carefully pinched back by hand.

The second stage is momiage, which occurs in autumn or winter and involves removing unwanted leaves. By thinning the dense growth, it allows sunlight to reach all branches, and increases airflow through the tree. During this stage, all unwanted twigs are also removed, including those that are growing upwards or downwards and detracting from the desired shape.



Pruning trees in this way keeps the tree to the desired size and makes for interesting and beautiful shaped trees, often to reflect trees seen in nature, and is practiced across Japan. At Kew Gardens, there are three pines pruned in this way at the Japanese Landscape.

This young garden feels as though it has been here for many years already, yet the first phase has only recently been completed, in 2018, and further developments are planned. We enjoyed our time in the memorial garden very much. It is open for all to come and enjoy and is a beautiful garden for all seasons.

3. Matsushima

A short drive from Sendai is Matsushima, a small coastal town whose name translates as pine island. Matsushima Bay has long been regarded as one of the three most scenic views in Japan. Its beauty was famously highlighted by Matsuo Bashō, the revered Japanese writer, who spent five months walking through Tohoku in 1689. Over 200 small islands covered in pine trees sit within the bay. The pines in this area are akamatsu or Japanese red pine (*Pinus densiflora*). Boat tours operate to allow a closer look at the islands, though one island nearest the shore can be easily walked to via a red wooden bridge. Here you can visit the historic Godaido Hall, a wooden temple built in 1604, a reconstruction of a temple which dates to 807.



Matsushima Bay, March 2019

4. Zuiganji Temple

Just a short walk away is the other major attraction in Matsushima, the temple and grounds of Zuiganji. The temple seen today was restored by Date Masamune in 1609 as his family temple, though a temple has been on this site since 828, and in the Kamakura period it became a Zen temple.

The view that greets you when you enter the grounds is stunning – an avenue of mature sugi or Japanese cedars (*Cryptomeria japonica*).



Cedars at Zuiganji Temple, March 2019

The huge trees sit in a carpet of moss, and it is a very beautiful sight. The temple grounds were given some protection from 3.11 by the islands of Matsushima Bay, though saltwater did reach some of the sugi and damaged their roots. The dying trees were removed, leaving gaps in the avenue, but a new generation has been planted to fill the space once again.

Two more special trees stand close to the temple entrance, a pair of ume-son or sour plum trees (*Prunus mume*). They are thought to resemble dragons and are believed to date back to 1609, brought by a shogun travelling back from Korea. We were too early to see them flowering, though they were laden with buds. It was wonderful to see these two beautiful old trees before they were in leaf, when their form could be most clearly appreciated.

The temple is a National Treasure and Important Cultural Site, and is also famous for its beautifully decorated wooden sliding doors. From inside the main building, glimpses can be seen of the gardens within the inner temple complex.



5. Coastal drive visiting towns badly affected by 3.11

400 kms of coastline in Tohoku were affected by 3.11. Whilst driving along the winding coastal road heading north from Matsushima, we saw just a small fraction of the reconstruction work in progress, eight years after the event. The huge project includes building sea walls and bringing stone and gravel from the nearby mountains down to the low-lying coastal land to raise the levels.



Reconstruction work at Onagawa, March 2019

The next part of our journey would take us to some of the worst affected towns along the Tohoku coast.

Onagawa is a small fishing town on the coast, and was among the towns worst affected by 3.11. Much of the town was destroyed, and many lives were lost. The town centre has been rebuilt and was reopened in 2015; its modern centre is now a hub for local businesses and has coffee shops and places to sit and meet.

We enjoyed visiting the town, though we were aware of the sensitive nature of coming to this area. I asked our guide how local people felt about visitors coming to their town, which so recently faced such tragedy, he answered that most local people do not mind visitors coming so long as they do so respectfully. Certain damaged buildings have purposefully been left as reminders of 3.11 so that it cannot be forgotten.

A little further north lies Rikuzentakata, where the town and community were badly affected by 3.11 with most buildings destroyed and many lives lost. One tree on the shoreline became known around the world as the 'miracle pine'. This tree, a specimen of *Pinus x densithunbergii*, became a symbol of hope when, against the odds, it survived the impact of the tsunami while the other 70,000 trees that stood with it were brought down. The following year, the lone tree died due to the detrimental effect of salt left behind in the soil. The 250-year-old, 27-metre-tall tree was felled and then preserved and re-erected as a sculpture of hope and a permanent symbol of 3.11.



Painting of miracle pine, by Masumi Yamanaka, RBG Kew

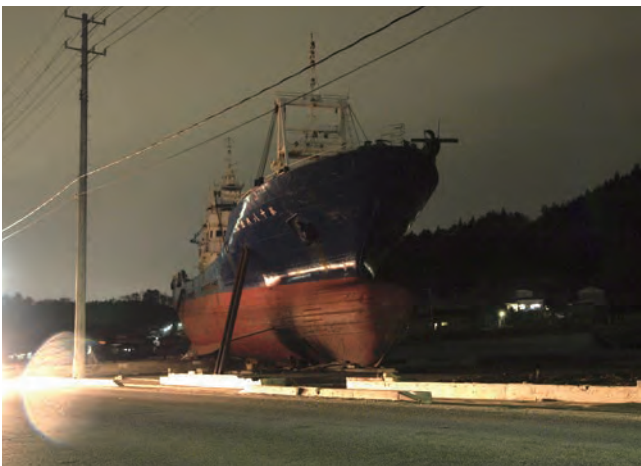
While visiting these affected towns we learned about kataribe, which is a traditional Japanese practice of storytelling. It is a way of keeping powerful stories about a place or a group of people alive, ensuring the memory of important events lives on. Sharing stories in this way can benefit both the listeners and the storytellers themselves. Kataribe tours now run in the Tohoku region, giving visitors a unique opportunity to learn about 3.11.

The last stop before heading inland was Kesenuma, a small fishing town. Here the tsunami of 3.11 had washed a large vessel inland, which has since been removed, and there is ongoing construction to rebuild areas of the town. Many people have moved out of the centre of the town, living higher in the hills, while the lower lying land has been built up by soil that has been brought in; in places the ground has been raised two storeys or more from its original altitude. There are plans to build gardens near the waterfront.

Miyazawa Kenji (1896-1933), a poet from Iwate prefecture in northern Tohoku, wrote of the resilience of the people in the region in the face of adversity. His words still resonate strongly today: a line from one of his most famous poems begins 'Neither yielding to rain, nor yielding to wind'.

We then began the drive inland to Hiraizumi, a scenic route which was at times spectacular, passing mountains and gorges along the way. The road took us through large areas of the temperate forest this region is known for, and we hear it is a good place to see autumn colour. Trees found in these deciduous forests include buna or Japanese beech (*Fagus crenata*) and aka-shide or loose-flower hornbeam (*Carpinus laxiflorus*).

Hiraizumi is a town in Iwate prefecture, and was an important economic and cultural hub in the Heian period. Today it is best known for two major historic sites, Chusonji Temple and Motsuji Temple.



Kesenuma 2011



Yuki-tsure at entrance of Chusonji Temple, March 2019



Yuki-tsure within the grounds of Chusonji Temple, March 2019

6. Chusonji Temple

Chusonji is a temple complex which was founded in 850 and largely rebuilt in the early 12th century by the ruling family, the Fujiwara. It was a large and important temple, but when the family lost power in 1189, the site declined in importance and prosperity, and a fire in 1337 destroyed many buildings at the site.

The magnificent Konjikido ,Golden Hall, dates from 1124 and survived the fire due to a protective structure that was in place.

We saw examples of yuki-tsure near the entrance, the traditional Japanese method of protecting special trees from snow. Yuki-tsure is as much admired for the beauty of the structure as for the actual practical reason for it. We asked a gardener how long it takes to master this practice, and the answer was 20 years, which shows how much skill goes into creating it, and it was a real pleasure to see this practice up close. We also learned that different variations of yuki-tsure can be found in different regions of Japan.

The complex is set on a hillside within a network of tree-lined paths. The trees we saw included some fine specimens of momi fir (*Abies firma*). In March, the grassy banks along the paths were dotted with pretty wildflowers and ferns. Walking in Chusonji was a real delight, with interesting buildings and plants at every turn, and it is clear to see why it's regarded as one of the jewels of Tohoku.



Tree-lined paths at Chusonji Temple, March 2019



Stone formation at Motsuji Temple, March 2019

7. Motsuji Temple

The garden of Motsuji is regarded as one of the most important gardens in Japan, due in part to its long garden history, being almost unchanged for 800 years. The garden is in the Buddhist Pure Land style, which came about in the Heian period, and it is one of the few remaining gardens of its type in Japan. It was designed in accordance with the *Sakuteiki*, the oldest Japanese text on garden design, written in the 11th century.

Once a large and thriving temple complex, most of the buildings which stood here have long gone. Dotted through the grounds are the remnants of the many former halls and temples, giving a sense of the wider history, importance, and former scale of the site.

Matsuo Bashō visited the town during his time in Tohoku in 1689, 500 years after the peak of the region's fortune, and wrote "The summer grass / 'Tis all that's left / Of ancient warriors' dreams". The haiku can be read from a stone near the garden's entrance.

Many irises grow here, and each June-July, a festival is held to celebrate the flower. Another festival held here in early May is a poetry festival called *Gokusi no En* or Winding Stream Festival. It represents a traditional scene from the Heian period, with people wearing traditional clothes, writing poems, and sipping sake that is floated in cups down the stream.



Lake and shoreline at Motsuji Temple, March 2019

Though it was hard to fully comprehend the great historic significance of the garden at Motsuji, it was completely mesmerizing. As we walked around the 800-year-old lake with its stone formations jutting out into the water, rain drops gently landed and wind distorted any reflections that could be seen. It was a wonderful experience, and something we will remember for a long time.

Closing



Gardens hold a special place in our culture, as they can be appreciated by everyone and can bring people together. Gardens could be placed alongside other aspects of human culture such as music, sport, or art, that can be appreciated by anyone regardless of any barriers such as class or language. A simple walk in the park is a great pleasure for many around the world.

In Japan, the celebration of viewing 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.



We saw many beautiful gardens on our trip to Tohoku. We had the honour of meeting many experts along the way, and it was a great pleasure to hear their passion for the gardens they design, work in, or manage. We also heard about the human stories behind the gardens, and this is something that really stood out in the gardens we visited in Tohoku: the human relationship with our gardens, that each garden has a unique story, and the importance of keeping those stories alive.

From Tohoku, we learned how the tragic circumstances of 3.11 led to the creation of the very beautiful Great Japan Earthquake Memorial Garden, a garden with a strong spirit. In the coastal towns, we heard of the traditional practice of kataribe and how it is playing an important role in the lives of those who live here. We visited towns that were rebuilding, and we learned the significance of the Miracle Pine. It was deeply moving to visit this region and to hear how people and communities came together in response to the tragedy.



Two keaki trees were planted in the Japanese Landscape at Kew Gardens in 2012 in a special ceremony on the first anniversary of 3.11. It also struck us that it is important that these small memorials across the world are also not forgotten.

As gardeners we are continuously learning from nature and this helps us care for our gardens. An example of constant learning from Kew Gardens came in 1987, when many trees were lost in a big storm, though a few also thrived after being moved by the strong winds. It taught those who cared for the gardens at the time more about tree management, and has changed the way trees are cared for today by de-compacting the soil around tree roots. We are continuously learning from nature, and this helps us care for our gardens. But also learning in small ways, such as seeing how a plant responds when we make a pruning cut.

Private Gardens, Tohoku, March 2019



Sakura sweet and green tea, March 2019

It was interesting to hear about the horticultural training in Tohoku. Passing on skills is so important for all gardeners, and this resonated with us, as we both began our careers at Kew Gardens through training programs.

The people we encountered during this trip were incredibly welcoming to us. We had the great honour of visiting several private homes and to view their wonderful private gardens, and were even treated to some delicious sweets and tea.



With our hosts at
Great East Japan Earthquake Memorial Garden,
March 2019

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.

People

Kikuchi Masaki, President of the Miyagi Branch of The Garden Society of Japan,

Host, guide and teacher in Tohoku, and main leader at GEJEMG

Takahashi Yasuo, Chairman of The Garden Society of Japan – Guide and teacher in Tohoku and Kiyosumi Gardens

Yokoyama Eietsu, guide in GEJEMG and Tohoku

Koizumi Ryuichi – camellia and juniper pruning lesson at GEJEMG with Kikuchi Masaki

Yukihiro Asano - pine pruning lesson at GEJEMG

Yagisawa Yuki – gardener and translator

Web-Sites



Spectacular Buildings: Sendai's Legacy of Architecture and Art
<https://topics.japan-insights.jp/#sendaiarchitecturelegacy>



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Appendix / Information

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Miracle pine

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