

## New Plants for the 21st Century: The Sun Still Rises in the East

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As you have noted, my presentation is about new plants from Asia, specifically Japan. Asia is much too big a topic to cover in any talk. Everyone is still going to China so I will be contrary and talk about Japan because I believe that Japan is still the best source of preselected plants for the American nursery industry. I know that China has more wild species but when it comes to plants that you can plug into production, Japan is still number one. Japan's domestic horticultural tradition is the broadest, deepest, and richest in the world. I am sure that there are people who will disagree with me but I know people in Japan who collect one species of cactus depending on the curvature of the spines. In addition, I think that if you look at which plants are popular in the American nursery industry, you will find that the great majority of them are from Japan, or China via Japan. I get better Chinese plants out of Japan than most people get out of China because the Japanese have so many joint ventures in China. They have money, so the good plants get into Japan before anyone in the West can get a chance to see them. So, if you have good contacts in Japan, you can get the best from China with minimal trouble.

We have had horticultural contact with Japan for over 100 years, and yet it is amazing how little we know about Japanese horticulture. Americans, when they think of Japanese horticulture, think of bonsai, which has not been a strong horticultural tradition in Japan for very long. There are still so many layers of interest that we have not explored.

Most of us have a romantic image of Japan, this is set by scenes such as Mt. Fuji seeming to float majestically above the clouds. We think of the beautifully composed and manicured landscape gardens which were not open to the ordinary Japanese person until about 30 to 40 years ago. Such gardens were only for the very wealthy and highest ranking officials. These images are true and do exist in Japan, but to say they are typical is a misunderstanding.

The construction crane seems to be the national bird of Japan. For 90% of the Japanese people the city landscape is the natural landscape — overbuilt cities and lots of gray concrete. Even in these gray cities if you get onto street level and poke into the nooks and crannies you can see some extraordinarily beautiful things — things such as beautifully sculptured masses of Japanese azaleas and holly that soften the hard surfaces. Even in the more traditional urban situations you do not see traditional garden situations — because there aren't any spaces for gardens. It is only the very wealthy that can afford a garden such as a 10 × 10 ft<sup>2</sup> plot. If you are extremely wealthy you can have a walled-in garden but still with only simple imaginative uses of traditional Japanese plants. Most people in Japan have to garden in the street. You can walk down a residential street in Japan and see a horticultural display that is remarkable for its variety and ingenious use of plants in pots that you normally do not think of as pot plants. And speaking as a nurseryman, I think you would be highly educated if you walked these urban

landscapes and saw the kinds of presentations they do with woody and herbaceous plants. There are a lot of ideas for presentation in American retail garden centers in these urban landscapes. People who are fortunate to have outside stairways and balconies, just take the plants up with them. It is interesting to see how people have brought plants into their lives when they do not have much space to do so. There is no place where you can not see plant displays: on the roofs, subways, fire escapes, stairs, any place where there is a bit of space left over.

You can also buy plants almost anywhere in Japan. There is more opportunity to buy plants in Japan than any place that I have been. You can buy orchids on a street from a vender. Department stores have some of the finest plant shops in Japan — at the entrance as well as in the store. A display of orchids in a dress shop in a department store is typical. It is common place for interesting displays of both native and exotic plants to be displayed and present in department stores. The Japanese are very fond of variegated plants and you can also find such displays in department stores. As American tastes have changed so that they are more open to variegated plants, this is an area of great opportunity. The Japanese have a perverse interest — which I share — in variegated weeds such as the variegated form of *Plantago lanceolata*. Other examples of variegated weeds include a variegated form of thistle, *Cirsium japonicum*, which is a popular cut flower in Japan. I have grown this variegated form and it grows quite well in Zone 6 in Pennsylvania. Another example of a white-variegated weed that I am growing is kudzu, *Pueraria montana* var. *lobata* which I call ‘Sherman’s Ghost’. Kudzu also has a yellow-splashed form that I call ‘Old Yeller’. My favorite is the variegated form of Japanese poison ivy, *Toxicodendron radicans* ssp. *orientale*, which I have named ‘Seven Year Itch’.

Some of the most interesting plant shops are on the roofs of stores. These urban plant shops on the roofs are often consignment shops. “Koten engei” plants, which are traditional Japanese pot plants, are examples of such displays. This type of display is to me one of the most interesting features of Japanese horticulture. Some of these plants are really bizarre. There are many contorted and variegated forms which have been grown for over 400 years. This is what I consider extreme horticulture, but as nurserymen we need to consider that what is extreme today may not be 10 years from now. I introduced plants in the 1970s that everybody laughed at but they are now standard nursery items because taste and sophistication have changed. Therefore, we need to keep in mind that some of these extremist expressions of horticulture might be the crops for tomorrow’s nurseries, not only for the big plant factories, but the specialist growers.

One of the things that the Japanese nurseries do so well is display and presentation, and they offer a lot of ideas for people in this country. Plants are displayed with beautiful pictures containing good information on the tags. I can not say enough about the need of making it simple for people to get excited about plants and then take them home and know what to do with them. The displays are not limited to expensive plants but inexpensive types, such as *Viola*, are attractively displayed in 2-inch containers. This is a level that we should aspire to achieve, transmitting the interest in plants in a very small space.

I became aware of the virtues of Japanese woodland peonies through such a display where roots were packaged and displayed with photographs and information. I have come to believe that Japanese woodland peonies such as *Paeonia obovata* and *P. japonica* are plants of the future. They require shade and nothing eats them and



they contrast well with ferns and hostas. They are extremely easy to grow and hardy from Zone 4b to 8. In addition to that they have beautiful flowers and foliage that is attractive through the season. Best of all they have seed pods that open to reveal red receptacles that split open and blue-black seeds — these remain ornamental for 4 to 5 weeks in the fall. If you are into shade plants you need these peonies. There are many things like this that are available — they are not new but often we overlook them because we are interested in sexier items.

We have been talking about roof-top stores with their enormous variety of plants. It is a lot of fun to wander around these stores and interesting to see that most customers are middle-aged men wandering around looking at plants. Almost all plants are grown in 2- to 3-inch pots, little is larger, therefore prices are low but because the quality is so high people are encouraged to buy a lot of different plants — I think there is a lesson in that. It is nice to visit the collectors and hobbyist but you can see an awful lot in places such as these stores. For those nurseries interested in specialty plants, plants not commonly found in the trade, this is a place to go — the holy grail.

The Japanese do autumn sales and displays better than anyone in the world. As a people they are very interested in what happens in the late summer and fall. Because of this interest the opportunities for fall-flowering plants are greater than anywhere else. This again may be a niche market for specialist nurseries because plant factories can not assemble plants to sell in the fall — there never will be much competition from plant factories in this area. *Callicarpas* are finally becoming popular in the U.S.A. and deservedly so. The Japanese have selected forms such as *Callicarpa dichotoma* 'Issai' because they display well in containers. There is a white-fruited form that is one of the most beautiful shrubs for autumn display — I originally found it in a department store. The fruits on the white form will remain attractive for 3 to 4 weeks after the leaves drop. Both the purple and white are fabulous plants for the cutting branch trade, and dry well too.

Another group that I think has a great future are the lespedezas, Japanese bush clovers. The Japanese have been cultivating them for hundreds of years for ornamental purposes. There are over 100 cultivars. Two great cultivars are *Lespedeza bicolor* 'Avalanche' and *L.* 'Samidare'. Lespedezas have two types of flower arrangements. Those with flowers arranged in clusters on the ends of stems tend to fall down in rain and never come back up. However, those with the flowers arranged on short side branches up and down the stem are ones to look for and these spring back up after they dry. *Lespedeza* 'Edo Shibori' is a bicolor with the wings white and the keel is a purplish-pink. All do well in poor soils — they "fix" nitrogen — and are one of the best covers for bulbs. You cut them back in the fall and they will arch out in the late spring when the bulb foliage is looking ratty. *Lespedeza bicolor* 'Island Dwarf' is a low-growing form that is great cover for small bulbs. One of my favorite dwarfs is 'Suzume'. There are also variegated forms.

Continuing with the theme of fall bloom I would like to mention a little-known Japanese perennial, *Keiskea japonica* var. *hondoensis*. This is far superior to *K. keiskea* because the flowers are pure white and it blooms for 4 to 5 weeks in mid to late fall. It tolerates shade and is extremely easy to grow. *Leucosceptrum stellipilum* has these really strange matte-finished yellow-green leaves that are a very interesting textural and color contrast in the summer garden in shade and then spikes of purple flowers in the fall that last until November — rarely seen in this country. The



Japanese have many different *Lycoris*, and *L. incarnata* with its striped flowers could not be easier and grows outdoors in Pennsylvania. *Rabdosia japonica*, with purple (species) and white forms flower in October and November — one of the most beautiful fall perennials for sun — best in Zones 6 to 8. Again little known in this country. There are many *Aster trinervius* ssp. *ageratoides* (syn. *A. ageratoides*) grown in Japan. One of my favorites is 'Ezo Murasaki' with its purple flowers. In semishade in Pennsylvania it comes into flower when the deciduous hollies are beginning to color up.

Another interesting place to find plants is at shrines. Some of the most interesting plant shows and sales are at shrines — and they are throughout Japan. Small nurseries that never sell in the big cities set up stalls at shrines; prices are low and presentation and quality are extraordinary.

There are also traditional garden centers (western style) in Japan and these are becoming more common as more and more Japanese have cars. They are smaller but tend to be clustered so you can visit many at one time. They tend to have a different cast on the market. The idea of clustering is becoming more common in the U.S. with auto dealers because it sells more cars and we should think about the same prospect with garden centers — everyone's sales would benefit. Because plants in Japan usually do not go into the garden but are tossed out after a couple years people are continually buying new plants. Displays such as citrus with a sample of fruit are a great selling idea and something we would be thinking about. How about moss. So many people have asked me for moss, but can you get it — no. It is certainly achievable here too.

The pinnacle of Japanese garden centers is the class of Japanese nurseries that go under the name "kozan shokubutsu" — nurseries for alpine plants. They are really not just for alpine plants but for all kinds of unusual plants. They are typically small and family owned, and they always have a specialty of some kind. If you are into weird plants this is the type of place you have to visit. One of the reasons these nurseries are so successful is because of the very successful Japanese overnight delivery system. Almost all these nurseries will take orders for delivery. These specialist nurseries are valuable for plant hunting and many of the plants you are familiar with in this country came from such sources. The selection of plants in just one such nursery is probably far greater than would be found in a large group of U.S. nursery. This is the place to find plants for the future, those that are outside of your comfort zone. An example of the potential is the three best current *Miscanthus sinensis*: var. *condensatus* 'Cabaret', var. *condensatus* 'Cosmopolitan', and Morning Light' — these three *Miscanthus* all came from specialist growers. A recent find is *M. sacchariflorus* with beautiful yellow-striped foliage. It does not flower, but just creeps and does not seed. *Carex* are finally becoming recognized. They are probably some of the best plants for shade. Plants such as *Carex morrowii* var. *temnolepis* 'Silk Tassel' which was collected in 1976 and is just now becoming appealing to nurseries. *Carex morrowii* var. *morrowii* 'Ice Dance' is similar to *Carex morrowii* 'Variegata' but creeps slowly so it knits together and is not lumpy, but does not run fast enough to cause trouble. Another one I introduced is *C. dolichostachya* 'Kaga-Nishiki' (renamed 'Gold Fountain' by a West Coast nursery). The *Hakonechloa* species, such as *H. macra* 'Aureola', are gaining attention. They tolerate shade and do not run too fast. There is a white striped form also and the green form is great for its texture. It is a good contrast for hostas and asarums. The Japanese consider the green form

the epitome of elegance. 'Beni Kaze' turns bright red in late summer and early fall. There are also purple clones, and yellow forms, so there is great potential with this plant.

Angyo was one of the the traditional nursery centers is in Japan, but it is being consumed by Tokyo as the capital spreads. This is the place to see traditional woody plants. In distincts like Angyo you can find an infinite variety of woody plants such as *Quercus aliena* 'Ogon' in which the foliage opens bright lemon-yellow and remains so until mid summer and then turns green. *Salix integra* 'Hakuro', a small tree willow, has new foliage that is lemon yellow for about 6 weeks — like fall color in reverse. A common Japanese tree not seen often in the U.S. is *Euonymus hamiltonianus* ssp. *sieboldianus* a very cold-hardy species with beautiful fruits. It is reported a scale magnet but I do not find it's so. There are interesting forms with yellow margins, white margins, and white fruit.

One of the hottest group of plants today are the vines such as *Parthenocissus tricuspidata* 'Ginza Lights' with variegated foliage — the variegation is unique in that it is splashed with white and the older leaves turn green. The foliage is a beautiful pink in the spring. Variegation can be too much, so I look for those that change to green as the season goes on. A few more example of variegated foliage include *Juniperus rigida* 'Hikari' for dry cold areas. It is particularly tolerant of drought. New growth is bright yellow that turns green as the season wears on — yellow tips against a green background. *Juniperus conferta* 'Akebono' with splashes of variegation I feel would be accepted by the buying public.

One of the most interesting Chinese plants that I collected in Japan is *Loropetalum chinense* 'Hines Purpleleaf', Plum Delight<sup>TM</sup> fringe flower. This cultivar holds its color better than other purple-leafed cultivars.

Lots of interesting variegated trees are grown. With *Zelkova serrata* 'Goshiki' the variegation changes from pink to white. It is extremely vigorous and easy to grow. A rigid upright form is *Z. serrata* 'Iruma Sango'. *Diospyros rhombifolia*, a large shrub to small tree, is a very hardy persimmon with small edible fruits and extremely attractive foliage.

Mr. Fujino is an example of plant breeders in Japan. He is crossing *Spiraea thunbergii* with other spireas to get other colors into early spring-blooming spireas. He has developed some good pink forms. Examples include *S. thunbergii* 'Fujino Pink' with pink spring flowers, good foliage, and fall color. *Spiraea thunbergii* 'Ogon', Mellow Yellow<sup>TM</sup> spirea is an extreme attractive yellow-green color with flowers that are half again as large as the species — with both of these features it will really set you apart in the spring. *Spiraea japonica* 'Neon Flash' that I introduced in the late 1970s is now just becoming popular. It is a replacement for 'Anthony Waterer', without the albino shoots, and with richer flower and foliage color. *Prunus mume* is the most popular flowering tree in Japan. It is usually grown as a pot plant. They often flower in February and March and they will tolerate a frost to 25F. Flower buds are hardy to -10.

In conclusion I hope you have a sense that Japan is about the relationships between plants and people, and that the penetration of plants into their lives is extraordinary.