

IPPS Japan exchange 2015[©]

K. Wood^a

181 King Street Cambridge 3434, New Zealand.

Getting from my hometown of Kihikihi to the city of Toyohashi in Japan was a whirlwind experience. Never having travelled overseas, the contrast in the landscape and culture was overwhelming. Everything was completely alien and utterly amazing.

Mrs Mizutani was my lovely host in Toyohashi. Our first destination was her company's tissue culture laboratory. What made the greatest impression on me was the dedication and efficiency of the staff; they were very knowledgeable and passionate. They processed around a thousand plants an hour, their dexterity in manipulating the tissue was fascinating to watch. In the company's greenhouse I was able to see how staff maintained *Mandevilla* propagated from cuttings. The dead leaves and material were removed by tweezers that were disinfected continuously. While time consuming this is obviously a good practice as the plants were of an exceptionally high quality.

We then visited a 'Home Store', where I could have happily spent a whole day. The range and quality of the plants available was fantastic. They also had an amazing range of landscaping supplies, seeds, bulbs, tools, fertilisers and composts. While in Toyohashi we had the opportunity to visit the botanical gardens and zoo. I really enjoyed seeing the large number of conifers and deciduous trees, many of which I was unfamiliar with. Akemi and I had some interesting discussions about issues in the Japanese horticulture industry. Japan faces many of the same issues that we have in New Zealand; environmental concerns, not enough young people entering the industry and large chain stores outcompeting with smaller businesses and growers.

From Toyohashi I went to a small village called Mitsu to stay with the Ohuchi family who grow table grapes (*Vitis*), dragon fruit (*Hylocereus undatus*), and orchids. Johnny-san, Okaasan, and Neil-san became like my second family for a few days. When I arrived they were preparing for the locally famous table grape festival. That night we had a concert in the café. The local men were very enthusiastic karaoke stars, their favourite being the Beetles (in Japanese). Although that may have been due to the large quantities of beer and sake consumed! The following morning we were up early and straight to work at the local shrine where the festival was being held. At 10 A.M. the queuing hordes were set loose upon the stalls. It was madness! I have never seen people so enthusiastic about fruit. I really admired the community spirit of the townspeople- even though they all grow the same varieties and are essentially competitors, they came together and supported each other, even helping to sell their neighbours fruit. I was also lucky enough to have the chance to visit Johnny's orchid nursery, which was a two hour drive from Mitsu. The natural beauty of the area was amazing; the mountains and forest dominate the landscape, with rivers and waterfalls alongside the road. I had such a fantastic time with the people of Mitsu, they reminded me so much of New Zealand because of their community spirit, connection to the land and can-do attitude.

Saying goodbye to the Ohuchi family, I travelled on to the small city of Suzuka to stay with the Uchida family. Uchida-san is a very inspiring man. I admire his ability to operate both a strawberry farm, café, and landscaping business, this flexibility and knowledge in multiple disciplines of horticulture was very impressive. On my first day in Suzuka Uchida-san took me to visit a tree auction, large tree nursery and two properties that he is landscaping. The tree auction was amazing. Trucks and people were swarming everywhere like bees. The trees that had been sold were flying through the air on cranes, being loaded into trucks. The large tree nursery we visited was great. I had never seen trees with such healthy and well-developed root systems. I had the opportunity to learn about some of the methods used to grow these trees, which I found fascinating as they are very different to our

^aE-mail: kim.z.wood93@gmail.com

own methods. As saplings the trees are uprooted from the forests and brought into the open ground nursery. They are meticulously cared for, manicured a single leaf at a time. Traditional pruning and training methods, centuries old, are still common practice. Every winter the trees are wrenched by hand and expertly wrapped in burlap and twine and then replanted elsewhere. This regular transplanting encourages the formation of a dense root ball with many fine roots.

Uchida-san's landscaping projects were very interesting. I own a landscape design business so I was excited to learn what ideas motivated Japanese garden design. Uchida-san explained that a connection with the land, the property owner and nature are important concepts to incorporate into the garden. This way of thinking is similar to the concepts of 'Genius loci' and 'Tangata Whenua'. Even though our garden styles are completely different, the desire to connect people with nature is international. Uchida-san also took me to some famous historical sites in Kyoto. I thought all of the places were extremely beautiful but my favourite was Ryōan-ji. I have coveted the chance to see this garden since learning about it as student. The experience was amazing, a dream come true.

From Suzuka we went to the conference in Maebashi. I really enjoyed visiting a rose growing nursery, plant breeder and seed producer and a ridiculously huge home store. After the conference I travelled with Mrs Mizutani, Kiko-san and Peter to Tokyo. We had a great time visiting the castle, shops and restaurants. Leaving Japan and my new friends was almost like a bereavement. The two weeks I spent travelling through this amazing country felt like a very short time. I didn't realise that travel would expose me to feelings of awe, discomfort, inspiration, fear, love and excitement. I hope I will be able to visit Japan again as there is so much more to learn and to see.

Thank you to both the IPPS New Zealand and IPPS Japan Regions for this life changing experience.