

# Japan's chrysanthemums: More than a symbol of autumn

By Linda Lombardi  
The Associated Press

**T**OKYO — When Americans think of flowers and Japan, we think of cherry blossoms. But to the Japanese, there's a flower for every time of year, and right now, it's the chrysanthemum, celebrated in festivals, shows, and home displays.

Like the cherry blossom, the chrysanthemum, called *kiku* in Japanese, symbolizes the season, but more than that, it's a symbol of the country itself. The monarchy is referred to as the Chrysanthemum Throne and the imperial crest is a stylized mum blossom. That seal is embossed on Japanese passports. The flower is also a common motif in art, and it's seen in everyday life depicted on the 50-yen coin.

Originally introduced from China, the flower came with a legend about longevity, the story of a town whose residents all lived to over 100 years old, where the water came from a mountain spring surrounded by chrysanthemums. Through selective breeding, the original simple flower was developed into many forms that most Americans wouldn't recognize as a chrysanthemum, such as a type with long, thin, spidery petals, and another that's said to look like a paintbrush.

Perhaps the most unusual mum is what's called the Edo variety. "They start off looking like a normal chrysanthemum, with petals lying flat, almost a daisy kind of form, but as the flowers age, the petals will twist and spiral around the center of the bloom," says Marc Hachadourian, director of the Nolen Greenhouses at the New York Botanical Garden. "It continually changes its shape till



**MEANINGFUL MUM.** A banner (left photo) advertises a chrysanthemum festival in Tokyo called "Yanaka Kiku Matsuri." As in the U.S., mums in Japan are beloved as a symbol of autumn, but in Japan they are also a national symbol, appearing on the imperial crest, passports, and even the 50-yen coin. Pictured at right is a display of chrysanthemums with spidery petals at the Sensoji Temple, Asakusa, Tokyo. (AP Photos/Linda Lombardi)

eventually the petals wind in a perfect spiral around the center of the flower." The New York Botanical Garden, located in the Bronx borough of New York City, recently hosted a show called "Kiku: The Art of the Japanese Garden."

At this time of year in Japan, you'll even find chrysanthemum petals in your food, in simmered and pickled forms. Fall is also the season for a range of festivals and shows celebrating the flower.

Small local festivals, like

"Yanaka Kiku Matsuri" in mid-October, are more or less an excuse for a party, with stands selling festival foods, games for children, and performances by local talent. There are a few examples of an old tradition of decorating life-size dolls with the flower, and of course, potted mums to buy and display at home. While that custom is familiar to Americans, the forms that some of these take are not. Unlike the cherry blossom, which is mostly appreciated in its natu-

ral state, the *kiku* is the focus of an elaborate horticultural tradition rarely practiced outside its native country, where the plant is grown into unusual shapes by prescribed methods of care and pruning.

A simple cascade-shaped example could be bought for home display at the Yanaka festival, but where you see this art at its peak are at larger shows that begin in late October and run into November. What's most remarkable about these displays is that each is a single plant, coaxed into shape by months of labor.

"You can have either three single blooms with flowers 10 to 12 inches in diameter, or, through a series of different techniques, take that same variety and grow it into a single plant eight to 10 feet across with hundreds of individual blooms on it — the 'thousand blooms' style

— all starting from a single cutting," says Hachadourian.

These forms can take up to 11 months to create, with a single cascade taking 65 hours of work. The technique is reminiscent of bonsai, but as evanescent as the cherry blossom.

"There's a lot of similarities to bonsai in the exacting technique to get the eventual effect, but a bonsai can be trained over hundreds of years, so if it doesn't look good this year, you can fix it over the next 10 years," says Hachadourian, whose garden is one of the few in the U.S. that practices the traditional methods. "In the 11 months of training the thousand blooms, if one of the branches breaks, that's it. You can't start over."

Not only that, after all those hours of work, it's done at the end of the season: "At the end when the flowers are done, we cut them and start all over again."

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