

A Merlin trust bursary report



Flower, bird, wind, moon - discovering yourself through nature

Kachō Fūgetsu (花鳥風月)

A Japanese bursary

Saturday 25th October - Friday 7th November

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To all the gardeners willing to share their time, knowledge and passion with others. It is one of the things that make horticulture so special. I hope to do their kindness and wisdom justice and to pass it on in kind.

To Bob, Peter and John my three favourite head gardeners, I won't say in which order. For your kind references, endless encouragement, enthusiasm but most of all inspiring others by sharing your passion, all of which made this trip possible.

My very forgiving family who are patient enough to indulge even my craziest ideas.

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About the author:

I began my horticultural career volunteering at Downe House, in Orpington, formerly Charles Darwin's home, entranced by the collections of carnivorous plants and Orchids, a passion that followed me to Wisley where I had the incredible opportunity to develop my skills and knowledge through their unique plant collections while studying towards my level 2 apprenticeship. I have then gone on to work in a variety of horticultural settings from public gardens, to private estates, to a commercial nursery before joining the team at Le Manoir Aux Quat'saisons in Oxfordshire.

I have always had a keen passion for propagation and wanted to use this trip to take a strong focus on specialised, traditional growing techniques including pruning and propagation of native and iconic Japanese plants, in order to build a diverse collection of hardy, Japanese native plants within our own gardens. I am fortunate enough to be able to share the skills and knowledge I have collected on our trip with others through teaching guests and school groups as a tutor in our garden school.

This trip has been a collaboration between myself, Nadya Pearson and Kate Nannery. As a consequence, we've chosen to each cover different aspects of our time in Japan to create a fuller and unique picture of what we learnt and took from the experience and hopefully make for some interesting reading.

Even though I learnt and was inspired by so much more than I have words for, my aim through this report is to specialise in three main areas of interest:

- Temple gardens and their plant collections
- Botanic and medicinal gardens
- Nurseries

Kate will cover the edible aspects of our learning, while Nadya will focus on the garden design.

I have picked a very small sample of the many gardens we visited on our trip to give the reader a glimmer of insight into some truly special gardens and gardeners we found so inspiring.

Aims and Objectives:

Our interest in undertaking a bursary trip to Japan was ignited by the strong impression Japanese food, culture and gardens have made at *Le Manoir Aux Quat'Saisons*, both in the gardens and on the plate, forming an integral part of our story here.

This influence can be seen everywhere, from our extensive lost Orchard of trained heritage fruit trees to our formal potager, tea infusion borders, medicinal herb garden, Asian polytunnel and, but potentially most of all, in our Japanese tea garden. We are incredibly lucky that the gardens of Le Manoir are both beautiful and varied, making it a really exciting place to grow.

Designed by Robert Ketchell and opened by the Japanese ambassador over 30 years ago, the Japanese tea garden now requires major restoration as, due to climate change and recent increase in susceptibility to pests and diseases, many of the original plants are no longer suitable, creating an exciting opportunity to create something new and sustainable.

As an Ornamental Gardener and Garden School Tutor, I will be a key part of the implementation and maintenance of the restoration of the Japanese tea garden and want to do my best to develop the skills and expertise to do it justice. The bursary trip allowed us to explore an array of stylistically different Japanese gardens to better understand their structure, planting choices and philosophy.

With this in mind we began planning our trip to Kyoto to explore the edible, ornamental and production aspects of Japanese horticulture. During our 11 day trip we visited an enormous amount of Kyoto's gardens, temples, nurseries, farms, markets, even some florists and garden tool shops, giving us a real crash course in everything from plant collections to garden design to food growing, in part because the application to our own work was so wide but also to try to find a deeper understanding of the gardens, horticulture and intrinsic philosophy we encountered on our travels round Japan.

My personal focus was to use the bursary as an opportunity to explore a range of temple gardens, specialist plant nurseries and botanical gardens to better understand how to grow and utilise Japan's native and ornamental plant species. The dedication, craftsmanship and skill I encountered along the way was exceptional and something I will spend the rest of my horticultural career aspiring towards.

Introduction

Kyoto is a city of gardens, some large and exuberant, others small and secluded, tucked away on winding side streets. It owes this to its place in Japanese history as the former Imperial capital for more than 1000 years (between 794 to 1868) and its mild, temperate and fairly damp climate. This long history and mild climate has resulted in a city filled with gardens.

In 2024 Kyoto's weather records indicate:

- regular summer temperatures of 25 - 35°C were normal, with the highest recorded temperature August: saw a record high of 40°C
- Lowest recorded temperature: January 1°C in the the city / -2°C in the foot of the mountains (-2.7°C)
- Driest month was January, and the wettest July, equating to 120 to 121 precipitation days per year, with an average rainfall for the year is 1523 to 1545 mm

in terms of temperature making it very similar to what we have experienced in Oxfordshire in recent years and therefore the ideal place to search for inspiration, as we begin to push the boundaries of what we can grow.

Consequently, this made it the perfect base for our trip, with excellent rail links allowing us to take day trips out to other areas including Nara and Hyogo.

Another defining reason for Kyoto's numerous gardens is religion. Shinto and Buddhism are the two main religions in Japan often co-existing, with many Japanese people practicing both. Both of which have a strong reverence for nature and the natural world. Consequently, many of Kyoto's 1,600 Buddhist temples, 400 Shinto shrines have gardens, with the addition of many more private gardens and 17 UNESCO World Heritage Sites, it is easy to see how it has become a horticultural hotspot over hundreds of years.

Throughout this trip, many of the gardens were tied together by strong philosophical elements, conceptualised into the designs of gardens and used to promote deep thought and reflection. These ideas and philosophies, grounded in religion, reveal their wisdom to the visitor by taking them on a path of contemplation and meaning, moving them closer to enlightenment and contentment. For me, gardening with the intention and ability to create such a striking connection with visitors was quite fascinating and something I wanted to understand and experience. Yet traveling around Japan you begin to understand how those philosophies are integrated and integral to a wealth of different aspects of Japanese culture, into the food, the hospitality and most importantly the growing and have a powerful way of opening you up to a whole new way of thinking.

Itinerary summary:

Date:	Itinerary for Ella	Notes:
25/10/2025 (Travel)	Travel day 1 - Heathrow to Shanghai, China	
26/10/2025 (Travel)	Travel day 2 - Shanghai to Osaka, Japan	
27/10/2025 Day 1	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Murin-an Garden 2. Tairyu-sanso 3. Nanzen-ji Temple 4. Heian Shrine Garden 	Murin-an - guided tour with the following sit-down discussion
28/10/2025 Day 2	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Nishiki market 2. Hydrangea Garden, Mimurotoji Temple 3. Kōshō-ji Temple 4. Byodo-in Temple 	Day trip to Uji district (South of central Kyoto)
29/10/2025 Day 3	Kajiya Farm - farm run by Yuzuru Kajiya supplying Michelin star restaurants in Japan and around Asia - Speciality in Micro herbs and edible flowers.	Shinkansen to Hiroshima Tour with the head gardener of the farm.
30/10/2025 Day 4	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Takeda Garden for Medicinal Plant Con. 2. Enkoji Garden 3. Shisendo-in 4. Tanukidani-san Fudō-in Temple 5. Ginkaku-ji/ Philosopher's path 	Beginning the day with a guided tour round the Takeda medicinal garden before separating to visit different temple gardens in the afternoon.
31/10/2025 Day 5	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Saihoji (Keokedera) 2. Jojuji Temple 3. Jizo-in Temple 4. Matsunoo Taisha Shrine 5. Kōgen-ji Temple 6. Hōgon-in Temple 7. Tenryu-ji 8. Arashiyama bamboo forest 	Morning walking route around the temples of Matsuo area before separating in the afternoon.
01/11/2025 Day 6	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Genko-an (Soto Zen) 2. Koetsu-ji Temple 3. Daisen-In Temple 4. Hoshun-in Bonsai Garden 5. Kyoto Botanical Gardens 	
02/11/2025	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Farmers Market (Ohara) 	The majority of the day was spent on a

Day 7	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Jakko-in Temple 3. Shugakuin Imperial Villa 4. Hosen-in 5. Shorin-in Temple 6. Sanzen-in Monzeki 	walking route round the temples in the mountain town of Ohara.
03/11/2025 Day 8	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Kyoto Imperial Palace 2. Kyoto Kojuen bonsai nursery (Visits to tool shops and floristry shops on route)	Team visit to Kyoto Imperial Palace in the afternoon.
04/11/2025 Day 9	Midori Farm	Farm visit with Chuck of Midori farm
05/11/2025 Day 10	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Isuien 2. Yoshikien Garden 3. Manyo Botanical Garden 	Team visit to Nara, starting with a morning discussion with the head gardener of Isuien. Botanic garden in the afternoon.
06/11/2025 Day 11	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. SORA Botanic garden project 2. Hanauchu specialist plant nursery 3. Okazaki Senkaen Co., Ltd. (有)岡崎仙花園 	Ella to visit specialist nurseries in a region just outside of Osaka. With guided tours of SORA botanic garden project and Hanauchu nursery.
07/11/2025 (Travel day)	Flying from Osaka to Heathrow	





Report:

The temple gardens

While gardens with a monastic or religious link are few and far between in the UK, even across Europe and the Western world; the garden, the landscape and the natural world are much more integrated aspects of religious life in Japan. It felt as if there was a garden on every street corner, beautifully tended and different to its neighbours, holding a uniqueness and identity unusual to gardens at home.

While historically private stroll and tea gardens held very similar purposes to private gardens in the Western world, for the private enjoyment of wealthy families often acting as status symbols where similarities can even be seen in the design principles, temple gardens put forward a very different philosophy of the garden.

Though also often funded by wealthy benefactors looking to curry favour, the horticulture and even the plant choices are utilised to impart and teach lessons on life, steeped in meaning, promoting self-reflection and personal growth. Plants are grown not only because they grow well there and fit into the wider landscape, but because the flowers are fleeting and transitory.

While my understanding has only scratched the surface of the depth of this topic I'm hoping through my descriptions of the gardens I visited and a couple of key Japanese philosophies I can demonstrate a little insight into what I encountered. The temple gardens have an individual beauty and uniqueness to their identity, each was different and each was of that place, that I really enjoyed and felt very moved by.



Hydrangea Garden, Mimurotoji Temple 三室戸寺, Uji -

Myojozan Mimuroto-ji Temple, the tenth Kannon temple in the Saigoku Kannon Pilgrimage, often known as the Hydrangea temple, is a garden nestled between the northern, green rolling hills of Uji, a region with a long history of growing some of Japan's best matcha. This is a garden both, of many parts and of many plants.

From the outset, walking towards the entrance to the temple you are struck by the cascading structures of 250 weeping plums on the hill above. These flower from the end of February to the end of March in waterfalls of white and red blossoms.

It is a steep climb to the temple, with each pause for breath gradually revealing a new magnificent aspect. The first reveal is of the mass planting of Azalea (small-leaved *Rhododendron*) nestled into the hills, in long tightly clipped rows, reminiscent of the tea fields the area is so well known for. The Kurume Azalea Garden is home to 10,000 Kurume type azaleas and 20,000 Hirado type azaleas. Flowering between mid-April and mid-May clusters of small flowers in shades of pink, white, red, and lavender. This type of *Rhododendron* (Kurume), a collection of which the temple is famous for, were developed by

Japanese nurserymen from the mountains of Japan's southernmost island, Kyushu in around 1840.



Next are the 20,000 hydrangeas stretched out in rows on the near slope, under a canopy of cedar (*Cryptomeria japonica*, potentially the 'Kitayama' cultivar grown all through the region for the logging of its slender, knotless wood). The hydrangea garden is home to 50 different varieties, including cultivars of the species *Hydrangea quercifolia*, *H. macrophylla* and *H. serrata*, even showcases examples of the mystical seven-tiered hydrangea flower, also known as the Phantom hydrangea, *Hydrangea serrata* 'Shichidanka'. Although not in flower it did provide an excellent opportunity to examine their cultivation and pruning. Hydrangeas, *Ajisai* in Japanese, are widely pruned in Japan immediately after flowering, down to the third set of buds. A technique new to me and one I'm keen to try given Mimuroto is given to similarly cold temperatures and snow fall. The rows are irrigated with seep-hose and weed suppressant membrane as water retention and weed management on such a steep slope must be tricky in places.



Numerous stone steps lead to the temple, revealing an astounding view of the city below. There has been a temple on this site for approximately 1,200 years, founded at the request of Emperor Konin when he heard of a magical event on the site. The heavy climb is rewarded with a beautiful reveal at the top.

While on the lawn outside the temple's main hall, you are met with another magnificent collection. Each of the 250 Lotus plants (*Nelumbo nucifera*) are planted into a beautifully

carved pot, blooming from late June to early August.

Irrigation runs across the top of every pot, connecting them altogether and keeping the crown of the plant submerged in the shallow water, while the leaves sit above.

With a good bit of help from google translate, the medium of mime and some very patient staff I was able to determine that these pots actually stay in place over winter, the plants cut back in the autumn and are left to overwinter outside, the water can freeze or cover in snow but as long as the actual tuber doesn't freeze the plant should survive.. The irrigation system can also be used to trickle water into the



pot to prevent the surface of the water from completely freezing over. These growing methods, as well as its edible and medicinal properties, make it lotus something I am keen to grow on my return.

100 different cultivars of Lotus are grown including the famous Oga lotus, discovered by Dr. Ichiro Ohga, a paleobotanist, at a dig in Kemigawa, Hanamigawa Ward, Chiba Prefecture. This variety was from an ancient lotus seed believed to be 2,000 years old and this cultivar is now designated a natural monument of Chiba Prefecture.

Ascending back down from the temple around the strolling pond garden and rock garden highlights the very beautiful beginnings of the autumn leaf display. Completed in 1989 by landscape gardener Kinsaku Nakane.

Each section of the garden is open at a different point of the year, in-line with different flowering periods of the collections.

Where in western gardens the aim is to extend the flowering season for as long as possible, the transitory and fleeting nature of a flower is seen as an integral part of its beauty in Japan. This is best epitomised by the phrase *Mono No Aware* 物の哀れ, a Japanese concept loosely translated as the ache of awareness that beauty exists because of the fleeting nature of life, one of the reasons the cherry blossom emblem of Japan.

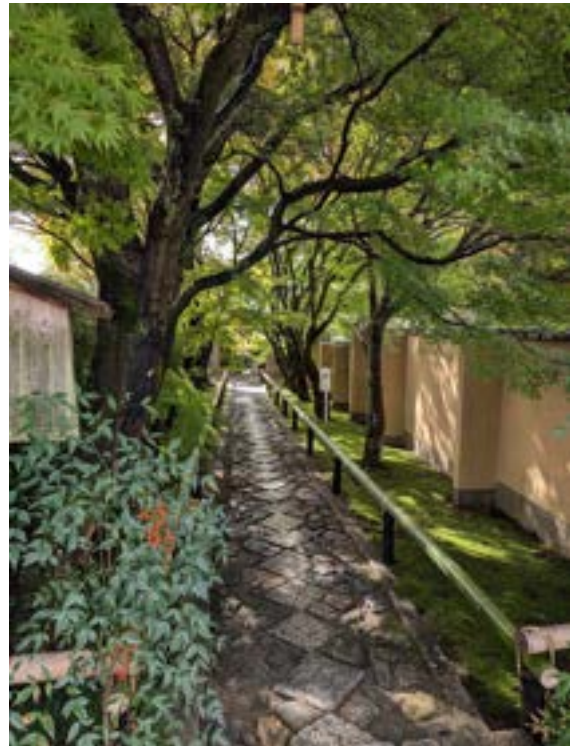


Kōetsu-ji Temple 光悦寺 -

Kōetsu-ji Temple is one of three famous temples in Takagamine, a region in the mountainous Northwest part of Kyoto, on the very outskirts of the city. A haven for artists and artisans in the 16th and 17th century the temples are famed for their connection to the arts.

Kōetsu-ji was once the residence of Honami Koetsu, an expert in calligraphy, ceramic art, gold lacquerware and the tea ceremony in the 17th century and is where he is buried.

The geometric path lined with *Acers* leads to the temple gate. Unusually, the path continues downwards. More unusual still for a temple garden the planting closes in, almost brushing against you, occasionally opening up glimpses through the woodland planting reveal forest scenes. A fork in the path opens to a seating area and a display of a Koetsu-gaki, a specific type of latticed bamboo fence.



The autumn colours deepening as the path opens up. *Enkianthus perulatus* are used with stunning effect, to create red, orange and green hues, all through the garden early in autumn season, while the *Acers* are just beginning to change their colour. Continuing down the path there is a sudden reveal as outstretched in front is a magnificent view of Kyoto with the surrounding mountains. The colours of the garden are mirrored on the mountain behind.

Many of the temple gardens viewpoints are outward looking, not back to where you've been but at the larger world and landscape outside the confines of the garden, offering not just reflection but perspective, the understanding that we are one small part of something much bigger. This traditional East Asian design principle is called Shakkei (借景), which directly translates to "borrowed scenery", integrating the garden with the landscape behind but acts also as a clever device to offer profound wisdom to visitors through nature.

Hōsen-in, Ohara 宝泉院 -

Hosen-in, is a temple garden yet again different from its counterparts. Where empty space is often a common concept in Japanese gardens, this garden is full, not only of plants, shaped shrubs, flowering trees and acers in the full force of their plethora of autumn colour, but texture and layers offered by gravel patterns, sand and stones set in every conceivable way, as jagged uprights, as paths or moss covered mounds, all spread across different levels.

As you complete your walk round the garden, you are invited into a tearoom, offered a bowl of matcha and a traditional Japanese sweet to the sound of traditional chanting, but the real highlight, as you take a seat on the tatami mat, is the picture framed view of the 700-year old, gargantuan *Pinus parviflora*, common name Japanese white five-needle pine / Goyō-no-matsu held together by a wooden scaffold, each limb carefully supported, trained and trimmed. The supports are treated as an integral feature of the garden, an idea best described by the concept of



Shizen (自然), which is defined by the idea of allowing nature to follow its own rhythm and for the garden to be shaped by it, while accepting the human intervention. It is a point of pride that the delicate hand of the gardener is visible, the care and the dedication, without creating something artificial. Enhancing nature rather than trying to dominate it.

Hoshunin Temple Bonsai Garden 芳春院盆栽庭園

Hoshunin Temple Bonsai Garden is a sub-temple in the 850-year-old Daitokuji Temple complex. Through the gates the garden hosts famous and renowned bonsai, that wouldn't otherwise be on public display, on a monthly rotation. The pieces range in age from the youngest, a mere 70 year old sapling *Fagus crenata* to an ancient 800 year old *Taxus cuspidata* belonging to Warlord and Samurai, Uesugi Kenshin. Exhibits are the



absolute epitome of precision, showing generations of devotion towards the pursuit of beauty and perfection.



Akin more to works of art, they are presented across a modern zen garden and visitors are encouraged to view each of the 32 exquisite bonsai individually to take in the conscious thought that has gone into every branch and every twist of the stem. The garden was created with the intention of encouraging visitors to admire and enjoy the living form of the art of Zen and philosophy in a historical Zen temple.

They are absolutely breathtaking and without a shadow of a doubt the best examples of bonsai I have

ever seen.

They came in quite a broad range of genera including some quite common and broadly used trees we had seen used across our trip and some less so. Some examples included;

- Pinus parviflora* (Japanese White Pine)
- Juniperus chinensis* (Shimpaku juniper)
- Pinus thunbergii* (Japanese Black Pine)
- Malus prunifolia* (Chinese apple)
- Carpinus turczaninowii* (Korean Hornbeam)



Acer palmatum 'Aoshidare' (Japanese maple)
Acer buergerianum (Trident maple)
Pseudicydonia sinensis (Chinese quince)

On leaving, my attention was drawn towards delicate, tiny pots hanging in an entryway. On passing through I found a beautiful collection of *Dendrobium moniliforme* orchids stunningly displayed on a combination of bamboo theatres. Native to Japan, Korea, China and the Himalayas, this species grows as an epiphyte in broadleaf forests or lithophyte at altitudes of 800 - 3000 metres consequently making them very cold tolerant, in fact in need of a cold period to induce flowering, with reportedly some cultivars going down to -1°C if kept dry.



Botanic and medicinal gardens -

Botanic gardens in Japan seem to be quite a modern concept compared to those in the UK, the majority coming into fruition in the last 100 years, though there are medicinal gardens that date back much longer. While visiting Japan we ventured to two botanic gardens, Kyoto, the oldest in Japan and Manyo botanic gardens in Nara and the Takeda Garden for Medicinal Plant Conservation in Kyoto.

Kyoto Botanic garden 京都府立植物園 -

Kyoto botanic garden is the oldest public botanical garden in Japan, founded in 1924, its 60 acre site is home to a collection of approximately 12,000 taxa. Its collections include the National collection of cherry blossoms with 186 varieties.

There is a familiarity in this garden to many other Botanic gardens around the world, large bedding displays flank the outside of the impressive glasshouse, surrounded by a wide lake. But even within these familiar sites, gems are hiding in plain sight, the centrepieces to the bedding display are fruiting papaya, bobbing on the water are



tropical waterlilies, their vast array of colours and massive pads drawing visitors towards the impressive glasshouse.

The glasshouse is one of the largest in Japan and displays approximately 4,500 taxa and it is astounding. This was owing largely to the quality of the light and the very obvious combination of meticulous plant care and true understanding of what grows well through the wet to dry tropics zones creates a collection that shows a real



lustre for life. Plants I'd never seen were in great combination to those I've known well but never seen looking so incredible.

The immense Orchid collection was a real highlight. Dotted through the zones, all within touching distance, no locked cases, allowed for a mesmerising up-close and personal look at the plants. This created the feeling you were completely encompassed by the plants, as you would be in their natural growing environments.



The photo to the left is one of my favourites *Pectabeneria* 'Wow's White Fairies' is an orchid hybrid developed in 2008 by crossing *Pec. susannae* x *Hab. medusa*. Creating a "primary hybrid" by crossing two species.

I have included some photos of a few more of my favourites, of which there were many, below.



On leaving the glasshouse we were introduced to many of the other hardy collections on display at Kyoto Botanic Gardens. This included a Bonsai exhibit, Bamboo garden, Paeonia collection, Camelia collection, Japanese Iris garden, Native plant garden as well as a formal rose and European style garden.



The Peony garden was of real interest to me as their extensive collection is grown quite differently to how I'm familiar growing them in the UK. The numerous cultivars of the two separate species of Paeonia (*Paeonia lactiflora* and *Paeonia suffruticosa*) were grown several different ways. Though neither species is native to Japan they are thought to have been introduced from China as far back as the 8th century and were widely used in traditional medicine.

The collection of *Paeonia suffruticosa* cultivars, commonly known as tree peonies as they are a deciduous woodland shrub, were largely grown in high raised beds with frames extending over the top so that shade netting can be pulled across to dapple the intense light and heat of spring and summer, presumably to prevent scorch and retain moisture.

While the *Paeonia lactiflora* collection, the herbaceous peonies that die to the ground during winter and reshoot from the crown, were grown in a field system we had seen used on farms across our trip. Described in English as 'making ridges', where squared off mounds, like raised beds, are made across the ground. The agricultural concept as I understand it, is that the height and width vary depending on the crop and the conditions; higher ridges (15-30cm) for ground with poor drainage, lower (5-10cm) for land with good drainage; while east-west orientation creates even sun exposure.



It is thought to promote three key growing aspects;

- Improved Drainage & Aeration: Allow roots to breathe by preventing waterlogging in wet conditions
- Better Root Growth: Roots grow vigorously seeking moisture and spread out more effectively in the loose, aerated soil of ridges.
- Soil Warming: Increased soil surface area in ridges absorbs more sunlight, warming the soil faster for early growth.

Covering the ridge with membrane suppresses weeds and retains moisture.

Another noticeable difference was that the crowns of these plants were much more pronounced than I have seen and grown them in the UK with the vast majority of the crown exposed and even some tuberous root on show.



The third growing system used was planting into medium sized pots. I think these were probably Itoh intersectional hybrid peonies, though translation of the labels was a little unclear, the pruning would suggest so given the difference to the other two collections. In Japan intersectional peonies are pruned to 2-3 large, fat buds (as these are the flowering ones) at the base of the branches in October, leaving that year's non-flowering growth, as they hold flowering buds at the tip.

Itoh peonies originated from Japan as in 1948, Japanese peony grower Toichi Itoh first successfully crossed between an herbaceous peony and a tree peony.

Many of the Peonies in the Kyoto botanic garden are Japanese cultivars with many from Daikonsima Island, Japan's largest producer of peonies that began specialising in their production in 1954. It reportedly produces 1.8 flowering peony stems each year.

Takeda Garden for Medicinal Plant Conservation-

武田薬品工業株式会社 京都薬用植物園

Founded in 1933 for research into the breeding and cultivation of medicinal plants, the Takeda Garden for Medicinal Plant Conservation now cultivates more than 3,000 species of plants, including 1,900 medicinal plants. The garden focuses on cataloging and conserving traditional and pharmaceutical crude drugs that are grown and displayed as living medicinal plants and dried specimens, as 60-70% of medicines come from natural sources.

We were warmly welcomed and given an incredible tour for all the senses. We were encouraged to smell this, chew that, taste this, the entire way round the garden and which made for a fascinating and interactive experience.



The garden is divided in 8 key sections, each demonstrating a different aspect of medicinal plants:

- **Central Garden** - growing plants used in medicines listed in the Japanese Pharmacopoeia
- **Spice Garden** - plants that are used for aroma therapy
- **Arboretum** - where medicinal and other useful trees are cultivated and exhibited
- **Camellia Garden** - over 500 cultivars of camellias collected since the 1950s
- **Conservatory** - housing medicinal plants from the tropics and subtropics, Kampo Garden
- **Folk Medicine Garden** - medicinal herbs orally



handed down by tradition from various parts of the world

And the **Kampo garden** - An area of the garden is devoted to the traditional Japanese medicine, Kampo - originally based on Ancient Chinese medicine introduced to Japan in the 6th Century. Recipes for common conditions and treatments are laid out in individual beds, which for me was a really interesting concept, an idea I would like to find a way to incorporate into our gardens.

Included in the collections was a myriad of edible plants that have medicinal health benefits, of which I have included a list of my favourites below:

- Sudachi citrus (*Citrus sudachi*)
- Gardenia jasminoides
- Chinese jujube (*Ziziphus jujuba*), also known as red dates, have been used in traditional medicine for over 3,000 years. They are highly packed with Vitamin C and antioxidants.
- Fruit: guavas (*Psidium guajava*), mango (*Mangifera indica*), vanilla (*Vanilla planifolia*), Goji berry (*Lycium chinense*)
- *Cinnamomum verum* - chewed the petiole, has a warm cinnamon flavour
- *Cinchona officinalis* (Quinine)
- *Myrciaria cauliflora* (Brazilian grape tree)
- *Uncaria rhynchophylla*
- *Camptotheca acuminata* - for its' anticancer properties
- *Tetradium ruticarpum* - Evodia fruit
- *Backhousia citrodora* (Lemon myrtle - anti-microbial)



Nurseries -

Kojuen bonsai nursery 広樹園 - resides on the outskirts of Kyoto city centre, tucked away on an unassuming residential street. The shop specialises in Shohin, a particular type of bonsai measuring in at under 25cm in height, owned and run by Tomohiro Masumi, a Japanese Shohin bonsai expert. Unfortunately, photography wasn't allowed but I was met with rows of benches completely covered in plants. They ranged from those I was familiar with seeing in bonsai such as *Chaenomeles* sp. (Japanese quince), *Chamaecyparis obtusa* (Hinoki cypress), *Pinus thunbergii* (Japanese black pine), *Pinus parviflora* (Japanese white pine) to some much less common bonsai Genera such as *Zelkova*, *Callicarpa*, *Akebia*, *Osteomeles*, *Acer buergerianum* (Trident maple), whom I'd only previously only known as full size, fairly vigorous trees and shrubs. In addition to offering expertly and confidently clipped miniature bonsai, in a range of mesmerising shapes, it also had a large selection of seed grown sapling trees growing on in a propagation space, ideal for training at home, which was very interesting to see. Under each bench were stacks upon stacks of beautifully crafted, minute to miniature, bonsai pots in every conceivable colour and style.

Ikeda, Hyogo - This was an area just outside Osaka that I visited on my final day in Japan. On arriving it looked like a very normal suburb, but further exploration of the ordinary streets found glasshouses emerging on every other corner. On heading further out of town, what felt like hundreds of nurseries with monumental specimen trees lined the roads. The region is known for its growers and plant importers, specialising in unique and high-quality plants. Many of the nurseries attributed the number of growers in the area to its incredibly mild micro-climate. Though only an hour from Kyoto where it had been a brisk autumn day, Hyogo had remarkably warm, t-shirt weather in early November.

Okazaki Senkaen Co., Ltd. (有)岡崎仙花園 -

Okazaki Senkaen is a wholesale nursery in the centre of Ikeda city specialising in ornamental houseplants primarily cacti, and other succulents, providing plant material for flower and plant shops as well as for interior decoration for office blocks and shops.

At home plant material sold for this purpose is quite often of lower quality and short lived, often focusing on a limited selection of plants that require very little care and attention whereas the quality and diversity of plant material I found in this nursery were exceptional.



Past the convenience stores, round the residential streets emerges an enormous commercial glasshouse, with others added on, ad hoc here and there, attached to a modest house, creating a maze of plants inside.

It is quite uncommon in the UK for visitors to be allowed into the working space of a nursery, but this seems to be much more common in Japan, where an appreciation of the craftsmanship of producers is encouraged. In every nursery I visited the mechanics of the operation were open for all to see. New succulent propagation was meticulously laid out and hand- labelled, individual plantlets left on moist kitchen paper and newspaper, left bareroot.

Even with plants covering every surface, the care and attention to every single plant is evident. No forgotten pot lingering dry in the corner, not a pest or sickly specimen in sight.



SORA botanic garden project -

SORA is a wholesale nursery and Japanese horticultural design studio led by Seijun Nishihata. I'd like to think I'd visited quite a few wholesale nurseries before and it was an environment I was quite familiar with but when I arrived at their 4-acre Osaka mountaintop farm I realised this was something on quite a different scale. They specialise in sourcing incredibly specialist and exotic plants, many European but also across the world,



supplying and designing gardens for everyone from the government to hotels and private companies to botanic and public gardens. Ancient olive trees (*Olea europaea*), some bigger than any I'd seen in the UK stood side by side with Japanese acers (*Acer palmatum*), Japanese pagoda trees (*Styphnolobium japonicum*) weeping cherry blossom (*Prunus serrulata*) and incredible trained pine (*Pinus parviflora*). They estimate that across their 5 greenhouses and extensive grounds across multiple sites they are guardian to more than 20,000 plants at any one time. of approximately 1,000 varieties. But it is the precision with which these plants are moved that is the real spectacle.

Each newly transplanted tree is heeled into the ground with a well for watering created at its base, tension cables or rope used to support it upright while its trunk and main branches wrapped in bandages to prevent wind damage and sunsorch, keeping it in as perfect condition as possible.

Fully grown cloud prune trees with 8-10ft trained branches from trunk to tip, are lifted from private estates, moved and sold on with a precision and care that has to be seen to be believed. Each arching and sprawled limb is wrapped and braced with a bamboo support to protect it in transit. Heeled in behind enormous concrete blocks.

The team proudly showed me a Ficus from Okinawa that has been gently removed, cleaned and transported almost bare-root on its side, foliage completely cut back but now reshooting, heeled into its own specialised container.



The care and precision with which everything is done is astonishing. And evident in every single plant I looked at. As was the generosity of their young and passionate team, whose time and enthusiasm I am very grateful for.



*'KUNZO' Nishihata at
Hanauchu nursery -
株式会社花宇宙*

Passed down through the generations from Kunzo's great-grandfather, Hanauchu nursery has been specialising in Ikebana, a form of Japanese flower arranging for the last 120 years. From which, in recent years, Hanauchu has moved into exhibitions and displays of tropical and sub-tropical plants.

The glasshouses are stuffed with collections of *Bromeliad*, Ferns, Succulents, Agave, Orchids and more.

Mr Kunzo, Sensei to his team, is a collector with a passion for variegation, having introduced and named several cultivars onto the market through observing, growing and vegetatively propagating mutations rather than through tissue culture. *Monstera* is his favourite plant and he very proudly takes me through some of his extensive

collection of variegated forms, including: 'Super mint', 'Yellow Marilyn', 'Devil Monster' and multiples of the highly sought after, unstable hybrid 'White Monster' which holds not only an expensive price tag but sometimes Kunzo's name too. His collection also includes many other forms of variegated plants including 30 types of *Philodendron* including the rare 'Red Moon', 'Persimmon Princess' and *P. verrucosum* 'Resplandeciente'. The variegation even extends to his uncommon collection of orchids.



The nursery, built over many floors is a maze of ladders, narrow walkways and plants, plants in every corner, hanging

from every ceiling, space created from nowhere - yet not overcrowded, everything given the space that it needs and meticulously cared for, precisely potted, perfectly mounted and absolutely spectacularly healthy. Grown in-house, by a team of 8 full-time gardeners, potted into specialised in house, open-textured compost mixes. It is a horticultural marvel.



The vertical use of space is used very effectively to create zones with the humidity lowering and light levels increasing with every ascending level. Ground level is predominately used for humidity and shade loving tropical plants as well as propagation benches for those plants. These are flood benches, used to further increase the humidity and allow the soil to maintain a consistent dampness, they are also tented but regularly aired to further increase the humidity but reducing the risk of botrytis.

We ended the tour with a bowl of matcha and a horticultural chat with my passion and interest in Japan, matched by his in the UK and our great deciduous trees and

renowned and diverse ornamental gardens.

This experience was a real highlight of my time in Japan. The unrivaled hospitality on every step of our journey, the care I was shown and the kind curiosity I was met with, will hold an incredibly meaningful place for me. It was a sentiment I found not only in horticulture but across our time in Japan and is best described by the Japanese term Omotenashi おもてなし, the concept of selfless hospitality and treating a guest with a deep care without expectation for which I am incredibly grateful.



Conclusions:

One of the most resounding conclusions I made from my trip was a complete respect for the intentionality and dedication I saw in every sphere of horticulture. Every garden and nursery is gardened with care, precision and thoughtfulness.

The concept of time is also very different. Nurseries are passed down through generations and that depth of knowledge and passion is passed down too. The gardens themselves are ancient. More often than not they have existed for hundreds and hundreds of years because they have been tended with the same degree of skill and care by generation after generation of gardeners.

I had a great fear before going to Japan that we were seeing so many gardens that they would all by the end blend together and look exactly the same, but I'm pleased to say my concern was completely without cause. There is a Japanese idiom *Oubaitori* (桜梅桃李) which translates to "cherry, plum, peach, and apricot" which symbolises that each of us are like different spring flowers that blossom at different times. It's a philosophy to embrace your own path, values, and unique timing for success, rather than measuring yourself against others, ideas that all foster true authenticity. This concept was evident in every temple garden and nursery I visited in Japan. Each had its own identity, a uniqueness that was completely embraced and often heralded as the reason that place was special and had survived for so long.

This connectivity was a theme I saw not only through ornamental horticulture but also in attitudes towards food, from the grower all the way to the plate.

Though many of the plants from our trip were very familiar I saw them grown and trained vastly differently to how I'd ever seen them grown before, with a deep understanding of its growing conditions with time taken to give each plant what it needed to be at its best. Whether pruned and trained to reflect nature or to enhance its beauty the same degree of meticulous attention to detail is applied to both.

Inspiration is taken from nature at every single step, not to control it but to appreciate and admire it. Which takes me to our title *花鳥風月 (Kachō Fūgetsu)*, the literal translation of which is "flower, bird, wind, moon" which tells that experiencing and finding a deep appreciation in the beauties of nature can allow you to discover yourself and find tranquility. It is a gentle reminder to slow down and find meaning in the quiet, beautiful, or dramatic aspects of nature. While this is a concept not unknown in the West, in Japan it has been so much an intrinsic part of culture and religion for hundreds of years that there are whole gardens dedicated to this idea, designed, planted and gardened all with this intent to bring the visitor closer to nature and to themselves. Gardening with such intense intent and to evoke such emotion places it closer to art or music than I'd ever considered it before and will be something that plays on my mind for many years to come.

It's difficult to describe what a unique and life-altering experience this trip was but I met people, saw gardens and learnt plants that have had a profound impact on me and I very much hope that it is a trip I am able to make again one day.



Ella's philosophical glossary:

- *Omotenashi (おもてなし): A concept of selfless hospitality and deep care for others, reflecting a preserved value of treating guests with utmost respect without expecting anything in return.*
- *Shizen (自然) refers to the concept of naturalness and allowing nature to follow its own rhythm, while also acknowledging human interpretation and contribution. It is a core principle that encourages gardens to be designed to look as though they have been shaped by natural forces over time, including the integration of human elements without them seeming overly artificial.*
- *Wabi-sabi (finding beauty in imperfection) In traditional Japanese aesthetics, wabi-sabi (侘び寂び) centers on the acceptance of transience and imperfection. It is often described as the appreciation of beauty that is "imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete".*
- *Sensei (先生) is a Japanese honorific term literally meaning "one who comes before," commonly translated as "teacher" or "master".*
- *Oubaitori (桜梅桃李) is a Japanese idiom meaning "cherry, plum, peach, and apricot," symbolizing that everyone blooms and grows at their own unique pace, like different spring flowers that blossom at different times, encouraging self-acceptance and discouraging comparison with others. It's a philosophy to embrace your own path, values, and unique timing for success, rather than measuring yourself against others' milestones, fostering authenticity and self-compassion.*
- *Ikigai (生き甲斐) - Is your reason for being and can be found at the intersection of what you love, what you are good at, what the world needs, and what you can be paid for. These overlapping circles lead to your passion, profession, mission, and vocation. The origin of the word ikigai goes back to the Heian period (794 to 1185).*
- *Komorebi (木漏れ日) is a Japanese term for the dappled, flickering sunlight that filters through the leaves of trees*

Appendices

Appendix 1. Final cost breakdown

Category	Cost
Flights	£703.10
Other transport (bus, uber, taxi)	£194.55
Train fares	£199.49
Accommodation	£488.88
Food/Drink	£333.53
Other (Admission/tour fees, misc.)	£384.45
TOTAL	£2,304.00

Appendix 2. Grants awarded & refunds made after underspend

Bursary	Grant amount	Pro rata refund	% of Grant total	Pro rata cost assigned
RHS *	£1,616.66	£393.33	64.24%	£1,480.05
HPS *	£166.66	£40.67	6.62%	£152.58
Tresco * (Thistledown Horticultural Bursary)	£333.33	£81.33	13.25%	£305.17
Merlin Trust	£300.00	£73.00	11.92%	£274.65
Great Dixter * (Christopher Lloyd Bursary)	£100.00	£24.33	3.97%	£91.55
TOTAL Grants	£2,516.67		100.00%	
Personal Contribution	£400.00			
TOTAL (inc. personal)	£2,916.67	£612.67		£2,304.00

* Grants awarded to a group have been allocated on a pro rata per-person basis, with the total group award divided equally between the three participants for reporting purposes.

The trip came in under budget. I had received £2,516 in grants and made a personal contribution of £400, creating a budget of £2,916. The trip cost £2,304, leaving £612 unspent. The fairest way to return this to the organisations which had kindly awarded grants was to refund on a pro-rata basis, according to

their grant's percentage of the total awarded. For example, Merlin Trust's £300 grant was 11.92% of total grants received. Accordingly, I refunded 11.92% of the unspent amount, i.e. £73. My personal contribution was fully applied and not subject to refund.