



Shared Beauty: Tokyo's Pot Gardens

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Shared Beauty

19

The Plant



Hand-made ceramic flowerpots
on a tiny Nakano balcony.

Can the flowerpot be a garden? Every city has a vernacular style of cultivated plants. Because of its urban history of density, modern over-paving, and simple horticultural convenience, the flowerpot is Tokyo's most visible garden vessel. In them, you'll find flowers, fruits, vines, trees, even rice and vegetables.

Flowerpots are modular, flexible, and very urbane as a garden platform. Because they're portable, they can be brought forward for viewing and combined according to season and interest. With few historical structures remaining, flowerpots recall Tokyo's Edo past and its urban gardening culture.

Edo woodblock prints of street life in the 19th century often show potted versions of Tokyo's most famous flowers, such as morning glory, wisteria, and chrysanthemum on tiered stands not that different than today's mass-produced or recycled ones. The plants and their gardeners connect us to earlier versions of city life. The multitude of potted plants still spilling out of restaurants, bars, shops, and residences and into sidewalks and streets indicate that gardening knowledge and passion is still just as strong, if not always as celebrated as in earlier times.

The invitation to write about Tokyo flowerpots prompted me to revisit the fantastic potted gardens created by my neighbors in inner west Tokyo. Their four seasons gardening, inventive use of space, and odd mix of frugality and exuberance have helped orient me as a newcomer to this endless city.

Taking cues from my neighbors, I've also been experimenting with my own container garden in a tiny balcony. It's a radical departure from the two seasons, small but in-the-ground San Francisco garden I tended before moving to Japan. My Tokyo balcony is one meter by five meters, and also includes the washing machine, air conditioner, and clothesline. But

facing south, this micro-space has allowed me to grow many vegetables, flowers, and vines I could never grow before.

Gardening became the welcome mat to learn about my Tokyo neighbors, seasons, history, and sharing. For this article, I planned a small itinerary in Nakano and nearby Shinjuku to visit four of my favorite micro-gardens, and teamed up with photographer and clothes designer Daisuke Hamada.

Two of the gardeners patiently explained how their gardens came to be, and what animates their hobby now. Mr Hamada also took photos of my balcony garden. Mid-course we stopped for ramen.

Mr Iijima (飯島さん) has created a vertical garden of about 500 flowerpots on his home's facade facing the street. It's ad hoc and built mostly with wire. He greets us by saying that nothing is blooming. His modesty is comical given how much is blooming. In telling the story of his garden, he recalls his youth in the countryside and the hard work that allowed him to buy a Tokyo house decades ago. His extravagant garden is his particular solution to not having space for a garden.

Mr Iijima explains how he collects rainwater and reuses bath water for irrigation. He also constantly rotates his plants, with out of season plants going to the roof, and new blooms displayed closest to the street. It would be a waste, he says, if those walking by did not enjoy them.

Nearby, Mr Ishii (石井さん) has turned his small street front garden into a complex, four seasons garden that includes many of the



traditional Japanese garden flowers and trees. Mr Ishii claims that he hardly takes care of his garden and that he spends no money on it. He says he plants wherever there's a bit of soil. Mr Ishii also readily admitted that he's breaking the rules (like many others) by extending his garden into the street. He does so to slow traffic and to make the street more attractive and safe for everyone.

Apart from the larger roads, in Tokyo you can safely walk down the middle of the street, chatting, taking photographs, riding a unicycle and playing with the near certainty that cars will be moving slowly. This is a freedom in Tokyo unlike a US city where almost all streets are designed for car speeds.

On our walk, we also stop to photograph a two story vertical forest sandwiched between more conventional homes. Covered in ivy mostly, but with palms, cycads, cymbidiums, *Campsis grandiflora*, and a climbing rose, this

dense green wall is more nature than garden, and it thrives with minimal care. Many months it's largely dark green, with leaf shape providing contrasts, while a few weeks every year it bursts with orange and white flowers.

The final flowerpot garden we visited is in the center of Shinjuku's Ni-Chome district, known for having the world's largest quantity of gay bars in a micro-neighborhood. In front of his former shop, another older gentleman has made a narrow garden entirely in the twenty-five centimeters between the sidewalk and the street. The garden extends across many storefronts on his side of the street and also the opposite side.

Beer crates and the city's guardrail provide an elevated stage for his plants, all of which are labeled. The owner once told me that he labels them because he is forgetful. I am amazed that one person can enjoy his hobby in public space, and with so little conflict with thousands of people who are visiting to drink.

Nearly every week, I collect more plants on my high-rise balcony. The ones that thrive and return every year are often the same ones that my neighbors grow. Like my neighbors, I like to shuffle my plants, displaying new blooms and bright colors in prominent places by the balcony door or inside the apartment. I will try almost anything once, including watermelon, bitter melon, eight colors of morning glory, and various bonsais.

I use plastic and canvas containers, and an ever-increasing number of hand-made, ceramic flowerpots. By adding my labor in the creation of the flowerpots, I feel that I am maximizing the value and care of my very limited garden space. Ceramic adds an earthy feel to a space so separated from the ground.

I share my neighbors' delight in turning limitations of space and money into a source of creativity and fun. Compared to the post-war hardships faced by my gardening neighbors, my arrival in post-Boom Tokyo has been far easier. In formal terms I do not belong in a country that officially discourages immigration and denies the existence of gay people and our relationships. But as with Tokyo city gardens, there's often a gap between rules and practices that can be overcome with creativity and love. Making a garden and a home are inseparable and at times a rebellion.

Gardening in Tokyo reminds me of my grandmother's suburban ranch home in the United States' mid-Atlantic, and her joy in growing flowers including roses and petunias. Getting your hands dirty, thinking about the seasons, combining and watching plants grow provide a lot of personal satisfaction. Living in dense Tokyo, gardening is also very social, and something that can be shared with and enjoyed by family, visitors, and just people passing by.

The flowerpot restricts the size that many plants can reach, and in that way they can be considered a limitation for urban nature. How-

ever, Tokyo's abundant rainfall and relatively mild climate allows some plants to jump the pot, cracking pots and pavement, and finding sustenance in the ground.

Domestic and public, Tokyo's micro-gardens connect me with my neighbors, people who arrived here decades ago, who are also seeking beauty with a willingness to break some rules. Urban flowerpots announce the seasons, and remind me of my neighbors' generosity and persistence.



Dozens of flowerpots occupy what used to be a narrow car parking space.



A sidewalk garden thrives in Shinjuku.



A web of small streets invites exploration.



A garden thrives illegally in the space between the curb and sidewalk.



The flowerpot wall is attached by wire.



Micro-habitat for wildlife and shade for people.



Mr Iijima tells us: "Nothing is blooming now."



Seedlings on balcony are fun to share with friends.



This vertical forest home is more nature than garden.

1. Flowerpot Wall House
Mr Iijima

飯島さん

“Humans can't live without plants.”



JARED BRAITERMAN

Thanks for agreeing to be included in this article.

MR IIJIMA

Nothing is blooming now. We're between the spring and the summer flowers.

JARED

What is your design idea?

MR IIJIMA

There's no space here at all. But still I decided to create a four seasons garden. In winter, it begins with camellias. That's the first to bloom. And then Cymbidium orchids. I grow mostly from seeds. In summer, roses. For fall, I have a lot of chrysanthemums.

JARED

What's difficult about gardening in Tokyo?

MR IIJIMA

Vegetables are difficult to grow in Tokyo. They like morning sun, but I only get afternoon sun. That's the worst for plants. Sunlight and wind are problems. Without wind, it's not good for plants. In the countryside, the wind blows throughout the year. The same plants in the countryside will grow even without fertilizer. In the city you can't always build facing south, which is ideal. Not like in the countryside.

JARED

When did you become interested in gardening?

MR IIJIMA

I've always been interested, from my earliest years. But I had my own business, so I couldn't do it. I had a vegetable and fruit shop. Since I closed the shop, I started gardening.

JARED

How do you take care of the garden?

MR IIJIMA

In summer I have to water the garden every morning and night. Upstairs there's water from the roof that goes into a tank. And downstairs

I use bath water. There are about 500 plants, including the ones that are on the roof now.

JARED

What's your interaction with the neighbors?

MR IIJIMA

I always bring the flowers that are blooming to the front, so passersby can see it. If I don't bring them forward, it's a waste. When they've finished blooming, I put them away, on the roof where nobody sees them.

JARED

Why do you garden?

MR IIJIMA

Humans can't live without plants. Something green is necessary. Just eating greens is not enough. You have to enjoy it by seeing it with your own eyes. Gardening is fun, isn't it? I do whatever I can do.

JARED

When did you come to Tokyo?

MR IIJIMA

As soon as I graduated from middle school at age 14. I was born in Showa in 1944. We'd lost the war, and there was no food. I'm 68 now. When I came to Tokyo, there was nothing here. We were dirt poor. You can't even imagine Tokyo back then. In Ibaraki I couldn't make a living then. I came to Tokyo to become a vegetable seller. People today graduate from university, and can't build a house here. Because there's no work now. Back then if you worked hard, it worked out.

JARED

Did last year's earthquake affect your garden?

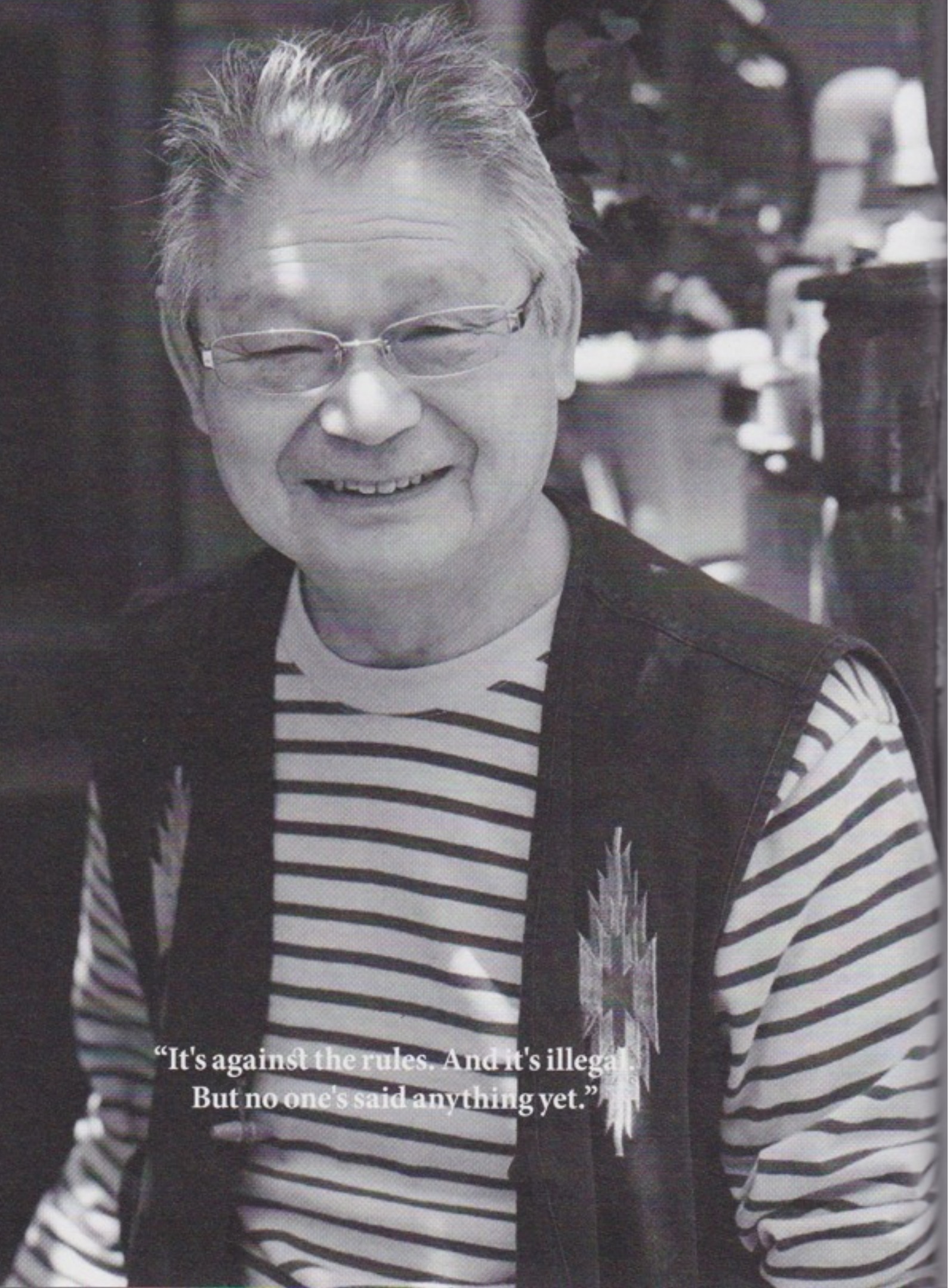
MR IIJIMA

During the earthquake I was worried. But there was no damage. The architect who made the house assured me that even an elephant can sit on the house, and it will be fine.

2. Miniature Japanese Garden
Mr Ishii

石井さん

“It's against the rules. And it's illegal.
But no one's said anything yet.”



JARED BRAITERMAN

Can you tell us something about your garden?

MR ISHII

I don't do much to take care of this garden. I've spent no money on this. I stopped planting annuals, and focus on perennials and trees. They come back each year, and different trees offer something for each season.

[He begins giving us a tour of the garden]

It's been 35 years since I started this garden. This is *sakigake tsutsuji*; the bloom is over now, but it was really beautiful. And this is *satsuki* azalea. You can see it everywhere, and it doesn't require much work. I don't have any expensive plants.

This is *yae zakura*, a cherry tree that has flowers with multiple petals. The root is probably piercing through the flowerpot and rooting into the ground, through the pavement. This is *anzu* (apricot). That is a Japanese orchid, which just finished blooming. This orange flower is *kunshiran* (clivia). Here's a plum tree. Here's some mint, which self-sowed.

JARED

How many plants do you estimate you have?

MR ISHII

I used to have many, but now it's more selective.

JARED

Could you please explain the design?

MR ISHII

[Laughs] There really isn't any. I just plant where the soil is.

JARED

How do you take care of the garden?

MR ISHII

I water the garden every morning in the summer. The wind dries out the garden.

JARED

What do the neighbors say?

MR ISHII

They say I'm taking care of it well. But it's not true. I don't do anything.

JARED

Where were you born?

MR ISHII

I was born in Niigata, from Sado-ga-shima (Sado Island). I moved to Tokyo in 1958.

JARED

I often see alley gardens in Nakano with plants on the sidewalks and in the streets. Is that allowed?

MR ISHII

It's against the rules. And it's illegal. But no one said anything yet. Because this is a one-way street, cars go very fast. I put the plants further into the street to slow down traffic. It prevents accidents. I wonder if anyone from the local government will complain.

JARED

I pass by this garden almost every day, and always admire your plants.

MR ISHII

Thank you. That's very encouraging to me, and it makes me feel it is worthwhile doing it. But my plants are not rare. They are not collector type plants.