

# Tokyo Street Gardens: Unrecognized Beauty

*Story and Photographs by Jared Braiterman*



Tokyo street gardens are surprising, intimate, and social. Moving through the megacity, the world's most populated by many measures, Tokyo residents and visitors alike experience the seasons by encountering flowers, fruits, insects, and birds that thrive despite overbuilding and poor planning. Thousands of anonymous gardeners add life and texture by taking their passion for plants into the streets and shared spaces of dense Tokyo.

## **Cultivating Beauty**

Cultivating Tokyo turns non-spaces into places of beauty

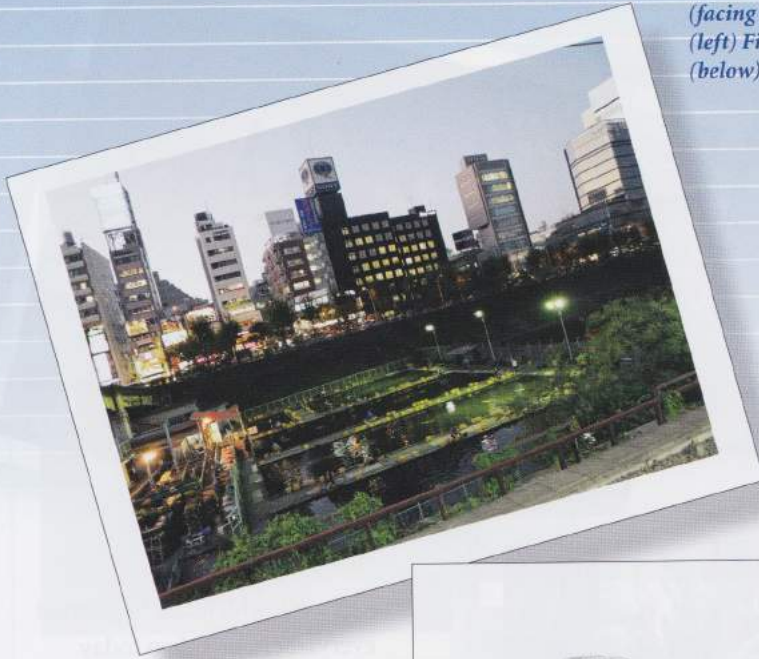
and brings a human element and scale to modern city life. Reclaiming nature and plants in the city also heals the damage and dislocation of the 20th century, when this old city was twice rebuilt after being burned to the ground in natural disaster and human warfare—the 1923 earthquake and 1945 firebombing. Tokyo street gardens are a living connection to the Edo period (1603–1868), which, in contrast to the hyper development of the postwar period, seems impossibly sophisticated and environmentally balanced.

Today you can peer out from the tallest observatories and see

concrete extend to almost every horizon. Where are the mountains and seas that figured so prominently in Edo woodblock prints? In popular representations of Edo city life, seasonal flowers decorate kimonos, Mount Fuji rises above the commercial and political hub, morning glory vines and bonsais are displayed in front of shops and densely packed urban residences. Nature constitutes an ever-present and ever-changing urban character.

While Edo culture celebrated decorative plants, the city also produced a surprising amount of local food. Urban agriculture, popular in the past decade over-





(facing page) Sidewalk garden (Shimokitazawa)  
 (left) Fish pond (Ichigaya)  
 (below) Hamarikyū Garden

seas and increasingly in Tokyo, played a fundamental role in Edo geography and social relations. Allocated small plots of land on which to live, samurais frequently turned kitchen gardens into small commercial enterprises to supplement meager salaries.

The popularity today of local food reverses decades in which an expanding city paved over countless farms in an endless expansion of industrial, residential, and commercial development. Elevated highways and concrete channels obscured the rivers, canals, and Tokyo Bay, waterways that served for centuries as vital transportation corridors and food sources.

### Nonplanning the Backstreets

The beauty and resilience of Tokyo back streets, animated by anonymous gardeners, are rarely recognized outside Japan



and even inside Japan. The most common international image of Tokyo is the Shibuya crossing, not the persimmons that still abound at the end of the year. Tokyo's human landscape includes more than 30 types of fruit trees, including loquat, mulberry, plum, citrus, pomegranates, and figs.

Tokyo street gardens provide continuity with the past, something an Edo time traveler might recognize even if no structure from the 19th century could be

found. The urban geography of web-like small streets, the high percentage of small landowners, and the gardens outside homes recreate a familiar landscape that goes back hundreds of years.

Streets are the largest open spaces available in built-out cities. Tokyo city planners continue a 20th century mandate that prioritizes automobile traffic, but nonmodern and nonplanned uses of the streets are not easily eliminated. In summer and autumn, Shinto festivals still turn



(above) Cucumber vine on a Nakano balcony garden  
(below) Sidewalk watermelon on wooden stand (Ginza)



these undervalued corridors into a communal celebration of local gods and primordial agricultural cycles. On festival evenings, one can still follow a succession of lanterns along modern roads built on top of Edo-period footpaths. Local residents still celebrate the rice harvest with street processions, music, food, drink, dancing, and games.

### Urban Village Ambience

What makes a city enjoyable? When we imagine a cityscape, do we think of monuments like

Sky Tree, glass high-rise towers, 24-hour food and entertainment?

Against all odds, backstreet Tokyo retains a village-like feeling with neighbors greeting, colorful flowers year-round, and fluttering butterflies. The sounds of birds and insects remind us that the city is home for more than human beings.

In spite of limited open space, a wet and temperate climate enables birds to sow plants without any human intervention, including the distinctive Shuro palm tree (*Trachycarpus*

*fortunei*), which can be spotted everywhere in Tokyo today. Fibers of this palm were widely used in Edo for strong rope, sacks, and even clothes.

Urban gardening unites the elderly, who often have more time than money to decorate their homes and shops, and the young, motivated by environmental and social concerns to redefine what quality of life means in a big city. Flowerpots, so visible in Edo woodblock prints, remain the essential gardening building block. Mobile and inexpensive, these vessels are made of plastic, ceramic, even polystyrene foam. One inventive street gardener attached flower pots to a traffic cone.

In recent years, Tokyo social entrepreneurs have built a rice field at street level in Ginza, as well as rooftop honeybee hives. Garden professor Makoto Suzuki of Tokyo University of Agriculture helps a private girls school design and develop a firefly garden. The required total





(left) Traffic cone planter (Kiba)  
(below) Ginza Rice Farm, 2009

darkness and clean running water are rare environments in Tokyo. Rail companies like Odakyu have built rental farms on reclaimed and marginal city land, providing nearby residents and commuters a place to grow their own food.

The urge to remake our surroundings at a human scale transcends age, class, and other demographic markers. Young Tokyoites video each other moving across the city on skateboards and throwing “seed bombs” on vacant and abandoned lots. Elderly Tokyo gardeners can be seen tending their public microgardens and sharing their talents with neighbors, customers, and strangers.

Tokyo street gardens include many traditional Japanese plants, including camellias and citrus in winter, cherry trees and hydrangea in spring, morning glory and rice in summer, and chrysanthemums and ginkgos in autumn.

Some gardeners focus on very specific horticultural interests, from valuable bonsai pots placed on top of a cinderblock wall, to a collection of many dozens of cactus on the street outside a small real estate office. On rainy days, the real estate agent covers the cactuses in plastic sheets to stay dry, and, on cold nights, he fills his workspace interior with his prickly companions.

### Microgardens and Gardeners

“Why do Tokyo residents garden outside their homes and on the streets?” is a question I am often asked. Upon reflection, the answer is because they can. No less eager to remake his environment than younger rebels, an elderly gardener explained to me that he hopes his potted plants on the street outside his home slow down car traffic and make the street safer for walking and







playing. He readily admits that what he is doing is against the law, but as long as no one complains, he will continue to garden both inside and outside the strict limits of his property.

In listening to my gardening neighbors, the characteristic that strikes me most is their modesty. "I am sorry that nothing is blooming now," apologizes my neighbor, Mr. Iijima. After retiring a decade earlier, Mr. Iijima has turned the three-story facade of his small home into a vertical flower garden. Today there are perhaps 500 plants attached by wire to the facade. Even the parked car becomes another stage for plants. Roses in summer, chrysanthemums in autumn, cymbidiums in winter,

and many spring bulbs.

"My neighbors say I am taking care of my garden well, but it's not true. I don't do anything," recounts another neighbor, Mr. Ishii. His microgarden has many traditional Japanese trees and shrubs, which create a four-seasons effect. There is always something blooming. He claims that the garden reflects a "no design" and "no money" outlook, yet he is also aware that the potted plants lined up outside his property slow traffic and improve shared corridors that connect neighbors.

Tokyo street gardeners display generosity and ingenuity. Mr. Iijima tells me about how he collects rainwater and reuses bath water to irrigate his flower pots.

He is also continually rotating his plants, with out-of-season plants going to the roof, and new blooms displayed closer to eye level on the street. It would be a waste if these plants bloomed and were not seen by passers by, he tells me.

Gardeners like these contribute anonymously to a high-quality urban life. They are following their passions and sharing their love of plants with neighbors and strangers.

### **High, Low, Vertical, Horizontal**

In dense 21st century cities, particularly ones already fully built out like Tokyo, the biggest challenge to creating a garden city is the need to reclaim space



*(facing page) Car covered by flowerpots (Nakano)*  
*(right) Loquat tree in a temple precinct (Kichijoji)*  
*(below) Four-seasons garden (Nakano)*



for nature and for shared activities. Since existing buildings will not be turned into open spaces, where can the city garden be cultivated?

Today, street gardeners are colonizing roadways and making them more inviting for walking, play, and bicycling. Roof gardens, too, are receiving attention in Tokyo as a building amenity, for environmental benefits and commercial objectives such as drawing department store customers to upper floors. From

beehives to vegetable gardening, roof space is just now beginning to be valued and used more fully.

The largest undervalued urban space in square meters is vertical. Whereas roof gardens have received worldwide attention, the potential surface area of building walls in cities far exceeds roofs. Tokyo has taken a lead in popularizing green curtains on mid-rise commercial spaces, schools, and government

buildings, as well as small apartment balconies.

The Sugunami Ward Office each year creates an eight-story, green curtain using nets and four types of vines growing in large plastic tubs on the plaza facing the street. The vines are loofah, cucumber, gourd, and morning glory. By late summer, this refreshing and creative gardening project reaches a height of 29 meters and has entered the Guinness World Records as the world's largest green curtain.

With this beautiful visible example, Sugunami Ward encourages Tokyo residents to create their own small green curtains on their apartment balconies and homes. Benefits range from energy savings to habitat creation. More and more residents are realizing that creating a green curtain is a low-cost and fun way to stay cool in the summer. Green curtains, like the





*Green curtain at Suginami Ward Office is world's largest*

street gardens, reclaim nonspaces as living places for people, butterflies, and birds.

Tokyo street gardens connect people to each other and to natural forces beyond human control. They recall Edo urban life and provide an alternative vision of a future city that values beauty over efficiency, community over private motor vehicles, sharing over profit. The city as garden suggests a creative way forward in built-out cityscapes by cultivating streets, roofs, and walls to provide local food, seasonal beauty, and encounters with wildlife.

The garden city is an alternative to many conventional models of urbanization and growth. Already tens of thousands of people are transforming their everyday city environments with plants and habitat creation. What would it take to multiply their efforts and make Tokyo globally recognized for its fruits, green corridors, and animal inhabitants?

Tokyo again prepares to host



the Olympics in 2020, more than 57 years after its first Olympics announced the city's remarkable and swift revival after burning to the ground in WWII. What will this Olympics say about the future of Tokyo?

The 2020 Olympics futuristic visions already include self-driving cars and cloud-enabled, real-time translation services, with stadiums designed by global star architects. Massive amounts of money will create new high-rise neighborhoods along the waterfront, including displacing the historic Tsukiji fish market. Fortunes will circulate for land acquisition, zoning variances,

and countless tons of steel frame and poured concrete.

In contrast or in addition to that top-down vision of building and selling, the 2020 Olympics can also be a time for alternative visions of a future city. What can leaders do to amplify the contributions gardeners are already making to Tokyo's livability? In every neighborhood, gardeners plant, tend, prune, and add life to the city. Tokyo's environment often prioritizes efficiency and profit, yet its street gardeners demonstrate what can be created in the interstitial spaces, where beauty and community are valued. ☐