

Henka-asagao, Amazing Flowers of Edo

Keiji Wakimoto

Researcher

Institute for Urban Development, The Mori Memorial Foundation



Do you know what kind of flowers these are? Many people are astonished to learn that they are morning glories. Some people who grew up in Japan may feel a sense of nostalgia to see the flower, as cultivation of morning glories was often part of the elementary school activities. Please, though, notice that these are very rare artificial variations called Henka-asagao.

The morning glory has long been a favorite flower for the Japanese people. As is told in the famous story about Sen-no-Rikyu, chano-yu master, who entertained Toyotomi Hideyoshi: Rikyu cut down all the morning glories that were in full bloom in the garden, and arranged only a single flower in his chashitsu, tearoom.

Cultivation of morning glories became very popular in the late Edo period, especially in Bunka-bunsei-era (1804-30) and in Kaei-ansei-era (1845-60). Iriya district of Edo, which still hosts morning-glory festivals today, became a center of cultivation of morning glories, attracting many amateur planters from all walks of life. They created various kinds of mutated asagao (see the images in this essay) and even published picture books illustrating rare species. It is astonishing that people in the Edo period were able to transform colors and shapes of morning glory without the knowledge of genetics. There are no other garden plants in the world with which change has been accomplished to this extent. They are called a living cultural heritage.



However, many of the flowers were lost in World War II and Henka-asagao became endangered. However, the practice is being resurrected in recent years. In July and August, exhibitions of Henka-asagao are held in various locations in Tokyo, such as Hibiya Park, Yokohama Municipal Children's Botanical Garden, and the Botanical Garden of the National Museum of Japanese History. Visiting one will give you a rare opportunity to learn about the gardening culture and aesthetics of Edo. Do not miss it.

References:

[Henka-asagao-kenkyukai](#)

[Yokohama Municipal Children's Botanical Garden](#)

[Botanical Garden of the National Museum of Japanese History](#)

(Henka-asagao of Tsukuba Botanical Garden 2012)

