

# THE SEASONS OF YORE: Transitions in a Seaside Suburb

By Patricia Massy

To get to my house I prefer the narrow, winding road that was never intended for automobiles. As the car brushes past tall hedges, pedestrians hurriedly seek refuge in driveways or nooks among high fences, and if another car should be met head-on, one of us has to risk backing into an electric pole or scrapping against stoney embankments.

The houses along this road originally belonged to wealthy families who would stay during the summer, but most of those rambling wooden structures and their spacious gardens have disappeared along with the pre-war times of leisure. In their place now stand a large yellow house, a green Bavarian house, an apartment house, and several nondescript houses displaying practical white non-flammable siding. What redeems the road and makes it so special are the hedges and mossy fences and the few original traditional houses, several having been bought up by Tokyo companies for their employees' use on weekends and renovated with progressive additions of towering blank concrete. One that is still privately occupied by a family that once farmed here is a large dark unpainted wooden structure with a heavy grey tile roof.

This is where my gaze stops. There is a wide gate, never closed, and in front of it always stands an arrangement of flowers. Today on a wooden table sits a large plate filled with *fukinoto*, the yellow-green buds of butterburrs. And in a long stem of green bamboo attached to the fence, one red camellia has been placed. A week earlier there was an old pickle jar bursting with narcissi. A couple of weeks before that the jar was overflowing with branches of ripe winter oranges called *natsu mikan*. In November sheaves of rice were hung



*fukinoto (butterburrs)*

over a makeshift bamboo rack. In August the table was covered with piles of vegetables, and a sign said in five languages: *Please take whatever you like*.

The arrangements could have come out of one of those coffee table books that extoll the Japanese for being so aesthetic, so kind to their culture, so in tune with nature and the seasons. Actually, what makes me stop at this house is that it is so different. In Kyoto one is likely to see a row of chrysanthemums set out in front of an old *machiya*, the traditional city house of Kyoto, but in the Tokyo area potted pansies are preferred, just as lace curtains have replaced *shouji* paper in the windows.

Here before me are butterburrs, modest little things that grow wild. Considered a spring delicacy, the bitter buds are a very Japanese taste, for bitterness is as appreciated as sweetness or sourness. People in the

countryside will search the warmed southern slopes for the tell-tale bulge of a butterburr pushing towards the sun, and having found one, they feel they have discovered spring itself. The specialty for dinner that night might be butterburr tempura or perhaps butterburr with *miso* on hot rice.

To admire a butterburr is to dwell in the spirit of *wabi*, that aesthetic of simplicity and unpretentiousness that underlies the Japan of old. *Wabi* is things that are not glorious, things that exist quietly, like cracked mud walls, a mossy stone water basin, irises growing out of a thatched roof, the trickling of water, an earthenware bowl slightly misshapen by the kiln fire. Sen no Rikkyu, the great 16th tea master, recognized the inherent profundity in things that are poor, and incorporated *wabi* into his style of Tea. In the practice of Tea, the vessels and method of serving change

with the time of year. Reflecting the seasons of the world outside the tea room, there is placed in the *tokonoma* a flower or two, and Rikkyu was adamant in choosing only those that were demure, preferably evanescent like the Rose of Sharon. His influence saved Japan from the excesses of ostentation that seem to characterize civilizations as they mature, until Japan fell in line with western development.

The *tokonoma* was a recessed area, a sort of shallow alcove, in every house where a scroll was to be hung, flowers arranged, and perhaps an incense burner or other treasured object placed. Even the homes of farmers and fishermen would have a *tokonoma* in the best room of the house, if they could afford a "best room." Shizue Ishimoto in *Facing Two Ways* writes of having to alter the entire scheme of pictures, flowers and ornaments each week for every one of the eleven alcoved rooms in the house of her husband's family. That was back in 1914. In the 1960's as people gathered more and more belongings and furnishings while the amount of living space diminished, the *tokonoma* became an aberration. If it existed, it likely was filled with a wardrobe of plastic sheeting for dresses and suits, or was commandeered to display a television set. Today's model homes are predominantly western-style. Women who work have little time for flowers, and most of those who work at home would rather spend their time organizing a charity bazaar of cut roses than contemplating the seasonal complement to a *tokonoma* or the loveliness of a wild thing close to the earth.

And yet the Japanese today do love "nature" and all the seasonal trappings to an astonishing degree. Where else in the world does the national television station dedicate a daily spot during its evening news program to a visual ode to whatever is seasonally characteristic, be it swans leaving for Siberia or fields of lilies in the high mountains? The seasons were the matrix from which Japanese culture



tokonoma

sprang and so even though modern Japanese may not be aware of the origin of their motives, they feel compelled to eat moist rice flour dumplings wrapped in oak leaves in May, converge in masses in June on a temple known for its hydrangeas, serve river fish with a sprig of green miniature maple leaves in July, buy potted morning glories at summer fairs, and visit the Arashiyama Bridge in Kyoto to see the "brocade of autumn."

Much of the seasonal fervor is fanned by magazines that find it just as necessary to focus on home decorations appropriate for the Doll Festival of March 3 as it is de rigeur to start a letter with "Now that it is the time of year of perfumed breezes, how are you doing?" or some similar poetic and seasonally applicable remark. They will recommend how to make the interior appear cool in summer with the use of reed screens and glass tableware or how to celebrate the viewing of the September moon with the "seven autumn grasses" and a tiny bamboo cage wherein a *suzumushi*, a cricket-like insect, trills a forlorn love song. They will feature traditional activities around Japan for the season in question: gathering seaweed at the stormy seashore of the Noto Peninsula

in February or drying persimmons in Nagano in October. They will have readers rushing en masse to admire the skunk cabbage in Oze Marsh at the first blush of spring or the cherry blossoms in Yoshino in April.

Japan is a beautifully varied land of blue mountains, misty valleys, green plains, turquoise rivers and pellucid seas. The early inhabitants saw this beauty emanating from the power of spirits, *kami*, that dwelled in all that exists, and they honored that power by respecting even the meekest plant. They gave thanks for the blessings of the earth and the sea, or as need be, prayed for their crops to ripen or the sea to give up its fish. The seven autumn grasses were displayed on the veranda with a pile of rice dumplings and autumn fruit for the moon to enjoy, not primarily for human beings. The round cakes of pounded rice that are set in the *tokonoma* and each room of the house during the New Year's celebrations were for the gods who inhabited those rooms or who provided the bounty of the New Year. The food was prepared as it had been in that home for centuries and eaten in gratitude.

Perhaps because nature is no longer sacred, the more seasonal traditions are exalted, the further they travel from reality, like Xmas scenes of snowy fir trees in Los Angeles. The Japanese New Year in many homes now is celebrated with rice cakes encased in plastic. The store-bought boxes packed with delicacies symbolic of the New Year are eaten out of a sense of duty, and if possible for one day only, for three days of the same food is boring to young people who refuse to eat leftovers. Meeting the *kami* of the New Year with a house cleaned and polished so that one's heart is sparkling fresh on the first day of the year means little to people who have discovered that they can become prosperous even without making the effort to be tidy and clean. The younger generation, never having experienced a time when all stores were closed during the first three days of the year, delight more in visiting

department stores than in paying their respects at a shrine. While through the store drift the melliferous strains of koto music (which they probably have never heard in reality), they play at choosing zodiac charms (which they really don't believe in) and buying New Year's ornaments (which they really don't need). If they are in Kyoto, they, like the adult tourists, will probably end up buying pseudo-Kyoto cakes and eating pseudo-Kyoto cuisine.

What is happening to Japan is that all aspects of Japanese culture are in the process of acquiring a pseudo-character, like a postcard picture of Mt. Fuji and cherry blossoms, with a geisha for good measure, but a bit more subtle. Japanese culture today is the way it is interpreted by the staff of magazines, television, and anyone with a knack. And as teachers of Tea and flower arrangement embellish the traditions of their time-honored schools without instilling in their students the philosophy of their art, Tea and flower arrangement have become increasingly form without soul. As it has always been a Japanese tendency to believe that substance follows form, or that so long as form is correct, substance is incidental, only a few individuals seem to notice that much of what is touted as traditional Japanese culture is like a shell with no crab inside.

After the cataclysmic defeat of WWII produced a yearning for the freedom and luxury envisioned in an American-style life, the Japanese innocently discarded many of the traditions that gave beauty to their lives. In the realm of aesthetics, wabi was brushed aside for the gorgeous and for the cute. On a social level, subordinating personal wishes in order to be of benefit to another was replaced by a glorification of the individual. Nowhere is this more conspicuous than in the disharmony and lack of space in Japanese towns that once could have been the subjects of a painter's brush. Today the concept of city ordinances requiring home owners to comply with



a row of chrysanthemums in front of an old machiya

community standards as in the United States in order to protect the city's image and natural environment is considered an atrocious infringement of individual rights. Here a city council cannot even demand that all urban houses be hooked up to the municipal sewage system. Thus a town like Carmel, California where people actually agree to having wooden fences and to maintaining streets without lights so as to see the stars is beyond the imagination.

Wooden fences and unlit streets, like old houses with darkened beams, represent backwardness and poverty. Consequently, Japanese towns have become masses of brightness that identify the Japanese archipelago from outer space. The homes whose wood glows with the patina of polishing by generations of hands are replaced by modern houses inspired, not by wabi or a love of nature, but by the practicality of plastic and paint and the wish to look clean and modern, which usually means western. And stung by criticism of living in rabbit hutches, people erect houses so large that no space is left from the pseudo-Southern columns at the front of the house to the road for anything resembling a garden. For some people a garden is

too troublesome, so they have the whole property covered with brick, or worse yet, asphalt.

At present one private property along the back road to my house is being torn apart to erect ten houses. Due to the narrowness of the lots, they will have to stand literally wall to wall. All trees and shrubs will be uprooted, even along the borders where stands one 150-year-old flowering plum tree. The pleas of economic necessity ring false because a people who truly love nature will find ways to preserve the beauty of the earth. Besides, just five years ago buyers were willing to pay twice as much for a parcel of land.

And so I stop to admire the butterburrs. While the Japan of simplicity and quietness melts away in the heat of progress and profit and admonitions to be global, there are people who still live the slow seasons of yore.

UJI

*Patricia Massy has a degree in fine arts from the University of North Carolina. She teaches at Kanto Gakuin University and writes and lectures on traditional crafts.*