

Planting Seeds for the Future

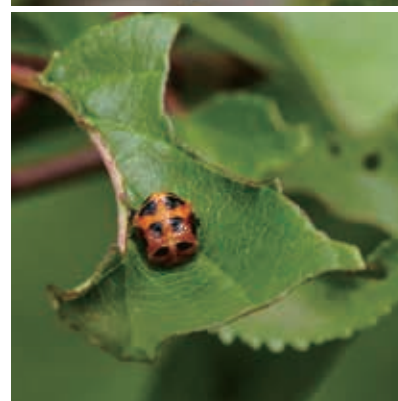
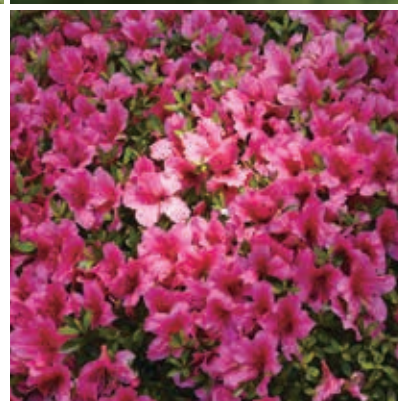
One botanical garden's mission: ensure the continuation of Tokyo's native flora.

by **Kirsty Bouwers**

The center of Tokyo has plenty of famous parks and gardens: think of Ueno Park, Yoyogi Park, or Shinjuku Gyoen National Garden. One garden, a short 30-minute train ride away from the city center, stands out for its commitment to biodiversity. Famed for its 5,000-strong rose garden, the Jindai Botanical Gardens, located next to the ancient Jindaiji Temple in Chofu City, western Tokyo, is the only botanical garden operated by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government.

Prior to the opening of the gardens in 1961, it was a nursery for trees set to be replanted along Tokyo's streets. Nowadays, the sprawling site is home to a staggering amount of plant life native to Tokyo, making it an excellent place to enjoy the city's flora in all its guises. It is home to around 4,800 species, with an estimated 100,000 plants on the premises. Laid out in a beautiful, symmetrical sunken garden, the famed rose garden alone has 400 types of roses. That includes the so-called "Olympic Torch," a special type of rose created in 1966, in honor of the Tokyo 1964 Olympic Games.

To learn about the breadth of the gardens' collection, visitors should head to the Center for Plant Diversity, located across the road on the northern side of the gardens. The center, which is devoted to preserving and protecting plant life diversity, is divided into three main sections. Each is an ecological system representative of the namesake area: the hilly, fertile Musashino plain set around the Tama River basin in the midland of Tokyo; the mountainous Okutama region in the west; and the volcanic, coastal areas of the Izu Islands located in the sea south of mainland Tokyo. Located even further south, the Ogasawara Islands are also represented, and to recreate the subtropical climate of that region and protect the plant life against winter, the plants are held in a greenhouse, reopened in 2016 after renovations, in the adjacent botanical gardens. All of the zones carry a number of species which have become less common or endangered in their native habitats,



Here the Great Greenhouse can be seen just beyond the famed rose garden at the Jindai Botanical Gardens. Other images show examples of the vast diversity of the plant life to be seen at the Jindai Botanical Gardens and the Center for Plant Diversity in June.

says center manager Horie Takayuki.

The study of these endangered species is the main focus of the facility's research. The center was originally opened in 2012, with the aim of preserving natural history and disseminating information on these matters. It also functions as an education center of sorts, with people being able to stop by and ask questions about the vegetation they encounter.

Many of the species in the center are considered endangered, with the reasons for their decline varying from the introduction of non-native plants, to human interference, and the destruction of their natural environment. Keeping the plants in optimum surroundings is at the forefront of the center's efforts. The position of each plant is decided based on its favoured conditions, such as access to light and shade. An artificial stream has also been installed to further emulate pristine nature.

The difficulties lie with the rarer types of vegetation, notes Horie, as what they need might be unknown. Sometimes it is a case of trial and error to ascertain what works best for these plants. Even if these plants are replanted into the soil they originally came from, they might not do well. It is a complicated process that leads to valuable research, he says.

Research is not the only thing the center espouses, though. With human interference being a key factor in the loss of biodiversity, the center also seeks to show visitors how they can be part of the solution. Horie has a few simple suggestions: be curious about your environment but respectful, enjoy the flora, but take only photographs and leave only footprints. And do not post the location of a rare plant on social media as that will only endanger it further.

Thus, a visit comes with a special bonus. The Jindai Botanical Gardens as a whole are a stunning place to visit because the sheer variety of plant life ensures the gardens are in bloom year-round. Yet it is the educational aspect of the Center for Plant Diversity that has a lasting impression. It is through the center's work that visitors may realize that many of these plants are endangered, which leads to a newfound appreciation of Tokyo's native flora—and a zeal to protect it. To stop and smell the roses has never been for a more worthwhile cause.