

Plant of the Season: Kiku by Katie Croft

When the wet and windy days of autumn have grown very dark, chrysanthemums are one of the few plants still blooming. Flowering in shades of pink, white, green, yellow and more, the hardy and half-hardy garden varieties provide welcome brightness for the cutting garden and herbaceous border at a dreary time of year. Wildly popular in the Victorian and Edwardian period when the “Mikado’s Flower” was considered the height of beauty and exoticism, both their appeal and knowledge of their complex origins have waned in recent decades. Luckily ‘mums’ are regaining popularity in the UK as more hardy varieties are bred. Hopefully they will soon shake off the accusation of being old fashioned or any association with death and cheap petrol station bouquets.



Figure 1: An autumn display of *kiku* in a tokonoma. (K. Croft)

As I discovered whilst delving into the history of cultivated chrysanthemums for this article, they are a complicated group of plants with a long history. It transpires that the chrysanthemums used in the garden and in floral displays in the UK include the Japanese species as well as similar but botanically distinct species and varieties which are not used in Japan. In this article I will largely be discussing the species *Chrysanthemum x morifolium* and will specify when referring to other species. Regardless of my tangles with taxonomy, chrysanthemums are extremely significant to Japanese culture. If you’ve ever seen the front of a Japanese passport, noticed the emperor’s symbol on a temple roof tile or heard of the ‘Chrysanthemum Throne’, then you will know that this is the pre-eminent flower of Japan.

The Botanical Bit

Chrysanthemum is in the Asteraceae family, also known as the daisy family. The genus *Chrysanthemum* contains approximately 40 species of perennial herbs and subshrubs of which only a few are native to Japan. The wide variety of cultivated chrysanthemums known as 菊 (キク, *kiku*) all fall under the species *Chrysanthemum x morifolium*. It is a hybrid of multiple species, possibly man-made and originating in China where chrysanthemum cultivation was recorded as far back as the 15th century BC. The primary parent of the hybrid is thought to be *Chrysanthemum indicum* mixed with a range of other species.

If you’ve ever visited a 菊祭り *kikumatsuri* in Japan or a chrysanthemum show in the UK then you will know that there is an astonishing range of cultivated forms (cultivars) in existence, despite the fact that they are all considered to be

botanically singular. In fact, there are an unknown number of cultivars in the world, possibly upwards of 20,000. In Japan, cultivars are divided into different groups according to their flower shape and size. There are three size categories: 大菊 *ougiku* (large), 中菊 *chuugiku* (medium) and 小菊 *kogiku* (small). Each of these categories is subdivided further into groups defined by flower shape or history. This is much like the way we name the shapes of other flowers, such as dahlias (pom pom, cactus, waterlily, etc.) and tulips (lily, Darwin, peony, parrot, etc.). Japanese cultivars are collectively known as 和菊 *wagiku* (Japanese chrysanthemums) in order to distinguish them from the western-bred chrysanthemums, 洋菊 *yougiku*.



Figure 2: A variety of *kiku* cultivars. The yellow, pink and orange spikey flowers are *kotenkiku* traditional varieties from Saga. (K. Croft)

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Understanding the categories mentioned so far is useful for knowing what kind of flower and growth habit a certain cultivar has but they also have a specific use in flower shows. If you were to visit a *kikumatsuri*, you would see displays of specific categories of *kiku* grouped ready for judging. You would also see *kiku* that had been trained to grow in specific shapes or to a specific height. These are also named styles, including: 福助づくり *fukusukezukuri* (each plant has one stem with only one flower), 三段仕立て *sanbonjitate* (three stems per plant, each with one flower), ダルマづくり *darumazukuri* (a shorter version of *sanbonjitate*), 千輪咲き *senrinzaki* (a single plant is trained into a dome with hundreds of flowers), 懸崖づくり *kengaizukuri* (cascading style), 盆栽づくり *bonsaizukuri* (bonsai form), and 菊人形 *kikuningyo* (chrysanthemum dolls). Please refer to Table on Page 37, and the photographs for more detail.



Figure 3: A traditional display of *ougiku* at a *kikumatsuri* in Sangen-in, Kagoshima. (S. Welch)

If you have successfully wrapped your head around all that terminology then I applaud you, it took me quite a while! Unfortunately, there is more confusion at hand. America and the UK both have their own categorisation system for chrysanthemums, neither of which tally up with each other or with the Japanese system. The National Chrysanthemum Society in the UK uses a code-based system to classify cultivars by size of bloom, time of blooming, colour and type, resulting in 22 sections with a range of subsections and descriptors. The National Chrysanthemum Society in the USA has a much simpler classification, recognising 13 types of flower. In this article I will primarily use Japanese classification but if you'd like to understand the western terminology, I recommend referring to the websites of the national societies, for example <http://www.nationalchrysanthemumsociety.co.uk/>



Figure 4: These *kudamonokiku* have been trained in *sanbonjitate* form. (S. Welch)



Figure 5: These *atsumonokiku* have been grown in the *fukusukezukuri* style. (S. Welch)

Culture Notes

Kiku were imported to Japan from China at some time during the Nara era or early Heian era as a medicinal herb and ornamental flower. *Kiku* have a strong presence in literature from the Heian era, indicating that it quickly became a popular plant after its arrival. There are many mentions of *kiku* in *The Tale of Genji*, including 重陽節会 *chyoyou no sechie*, the Festival of the Double 9th or 菊の節句 *kikunoseki*, the Chrysanthemum Festival.

The ninth day of the ninth month of the lunar calendar was considered an auspicious day in Chinese culture. It was first celebrated in Japan in the Nara period and then later became associated with *kiku* at some point during the Heian period.

Table 1: Kiku classification in Japan		
Size	Flower Type	Use
大菊 <i>ougiku</i> Large	<i>atsumono</i> <i>kudamono</i> <i>Ichimonji</i>	Trained into <i>fukusukezukuri</i> , <i>sanbonjitate</i> , <i>darumazukuri</i> or <i>senrinzaki</i> style displays
中菊 <i>chuugiku</i> Medium	ポットマム <i>pottomamu</i> スプレー spray	Medium sized <i>kiku</i> are not trained for competition but are used for funeral flowers, for ikebana and general ornamental display. They have many flowers per stem and are often sold in pots or bouquets.
	古典菊 <i>kotenkiku</i>	<i>Kotenkiku</i> are classical varieties that date back to the Edo period or earlier. There is a wide variety of flower forms in these cultivars which are grouped according to their place of origin. For example, Ise, Saga, Higo.
小菊 <i>kogiku</i> Small	古典菊 <i>kotenkiku</i>	Trained into <i>kengaizukuri</i> , <i>bonsaizukuri</i> , and <i>kikuningyo</i> displays
食用菊 <i>shyokuyougiku</i>		Cultivars which are grown for edible usage, e.g. 'Zao', 'Takasago' and 'Kaki no moto.'
(Sources: Botany Boy, 2014; Abe, 2018; Wikipedia Users, 2021 and National Museum of Japanese History, 2013)		

Although the festival is now celebrated on the 9th of September in Japan, the ninth month of the lunar calendar is later in the year when *kiku* would reliably have been blooming. There are many stories and legends associating both the festival of the ninth and *kiku* with long life which are frequently referenced in *Tale of Genji* and other poetry. It was thought that the dew of *kiku* when brushed upon the face would confer a youthful appearance and drinking *kiku* sake would give long life.

Kiku petals are edible and can often be seen as adornments to sushi and other dishes. The

dried flowers are used for tea whilst dried petals are still sprinkled on the surface of sake in the continuation of the old tradition.

At the end of his reign of 1183–98 AD, Emperor Go-Toba made *kiku* the imperial emblem and since then the flower has had associations with nobility (Akamizu, 2019). At that time it was not the extravagant, blowsy flower we see today but a variety closer to its wild origins. Today's version of the imperial seal illustrates the *ichimonji* varieties of *kiku*.



Figure 6: The traditional dome shape of *kiku* trained in the *senrinzaki* style. There aren't quite a thousand blooms here but this is very impressive flowering for only one plant. (K. Croft)



Figure 7: Examples of *kengaizukuri* (cascade) training style using *kogiku*. A plant is trained to grow over a bamboo structure to make a shield shape. Unlike in *kikuningyo* style, the base of the plant is usually visible. In this case the plant sits in a box on the wooden stand behind the shield shape. (K. Croft)

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Since the arrival of the chrysanthemum in Japan, skilled breeding resulted in an explosion of forms. Some of the older varieties still survive, and they are known by their geographical origin.

The Saga *kiku* are recognizable by their upward reaching petals that give the impression of a bottle brush. By the end of the Edo period, the flower forms and training styles that we see



Figure 8: This print from the 1790s illustrates *kikunoseki*, the Chrysanthemum Festival. *Woman Holding a Wooden Cup Stand Decorated with Chrysanthemums* from the series *Elegant Pictures of the Five Seasonal Festivals* by Chōbunsai Eishi. (Source: <https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1930.221>)



Figure 9: 百種接分菊 *One Hundred Varieties Grafted Together* by Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1798–1861) from the ukiyo-e print album "*Fūzoku azuma nishiki-e*". (Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:NDL-DC_1307605-Utagawa_Kuniyoshi-%E7%99%BE%E7%A8%AE%E6%8E%A5%E5%88%86%E8%8F%8A-cmb.jpg)

けふごとに菊を薬とする人はちとせのなかには過ぐといふなり

kyō goto ni

Every year today

kiku o kusuri to

Chrysanthemums for medicine

suru hito wa

Do people take, that

chitose no naka wa

A thousand years together

sugu to iu nari

And more will they have, they say

The Ninth Day of the Ninth Month by 源仲実 Minamoto no Nakazane. *Eikyū Hyakushū* 247, 12th century.

<http://www.wakapoetry.net/eikyū-hyakushū-247/>

today had been fully established, as we can see in the work of *ukiyo-e* artists of the time. However, there was certainly some artistic license adopted, as in Kuniyoshi's *One Hundred Varieties Grafted Together*: whilst it is completely possible to graft many different varieties of *kiku* together into one plant (*kiku* grafting is still done today). A blue *kiku* did not exist until this century. In 2017, Japanese scientists successfully genetically engineered a *kiku* by inserting genes from the blue *Campanula* flower (Merrit, 2017).

Aside from long life and nobility, *kiku* has multiple other associations. The mid-sized spray *kiku* are often given as offerings at shrines, altars and graves. This has now led to an association with death in popular culture but they were traditionally used for this purpose because



Figure 10: A display of blooms at a National Chrysanthemum Society in the UK. These would be called *kudamonokiku* in Japan, fantasy mums in the UK and Spider mums in the USA. Some of these are Japanese varieties: 'Senkyo Jonetsu' (pink), 'Senkyo Karyu' (light pink) and 'Goshu Penta' (bronze). (R. Brownbridge, National Chrysanthemum Society)

the strong scent of the leaves was thought to drive off evil. For that reason, and their role as a representative of autumn, they are also a popular flower for *ikebana* and 茶花 *chyabana* (tea ceremony flowers). (Akamizu, 2019).

Where to see

In the UK, Hill Close Gardens near Warwick and Temple Newsom on the outskirts of Leeds both hold national collections of chrysanthemums. The National Chrysanthemum Society also holds regular shows around the country – see their website for details.

Unfortunately, the specialist chrysanthemum houses at Kew, Battersea Park, Liverpool Botanic Gardens and elsewhere (Way, 2000, p.141) are no longer in existence. If you happen to be in Pennsylvania in autumn, Longwood Gardens has an enormous chrysanthemum show, including impressive *senrinzaki* (thousand bloom) specimens and more.

In Japan there are *kikumatsuri* in temples, shrines and gardens almost everywhere in late October and early November. The Kasama Inari Jinja in Ibaraki holds Japan's oldest *kikumatsuri*, having started in 1890. 日本菊花会 Nippon Kikuhankai All Japan Chrysanthemum Exhibition is a very large national competition for *kiku* growers and is open to the public.

If you are planning a trip in autumn and would like to see a *kikumatsuri*, there is a lot of information in English online giving the dates of each annual festival by town or region, so I recommend checking for up-to-date information when planning your trip.



Figure 11: These flowers were grown by expert chrysanthemum grower Ivor Mace. In Japan, this style of flower would be in the *atsumono* division but in the UK they are referred to as section 1. These plants are trained to produce one very large flower (equivalent to the *fukusukezukuri* style) (I. Mace)

How to Grow

The first thing to know if you are considering growing a variety of *kiku* is that *Chrysanthemum x morifolium* is not hardy in the UK and must be grown in a pot in a glasshouse or brought inside in winter. The second thing to know is that it takes extremely specialised skill and care to grow any of the large-flowered varieties or to train a plant into one of the specialised shapes. For example, for *fukusukezukuri*, *sanbonjitate* or *darumazukuri*, you must train the plant to have only 1 or 3 strong stem(s). You must remove all but the chosen stem(s) and then train them to grow straight upright, removing any growth that attempts to branch sideways.

If growing for a specific show, you must also 'stop' the plant (pinch out the top) on a certain date to get it to produce the flower on time, or to get it to

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flower at a certain height. It is common practice to thin out leaves so that the remaining leaves grow larger (Botany Boy, 2014). The stopping date will vary with growing conditions, cultivar and the style of training. The petals of some of the large-flowered varieties need support as they are so large, either with wire or paper discs. In order to grow *kengaizukuri*, *senrinzaki* or *kikuningyou*, specific wiring techniques and bamboo structures are employed in order to train the plant to grow into the right shape and flower simultaneously.

The 'body' of the *kikuningyou* is formed of a bamboo frame which is filled up with *kiku* plants to create 'clothes.' They are held in place with moss and twine using specific techniques



Figure 12: *kikuningyou* (Chrysanthemum dolls) on display at Sengan-en, Kagoshima. (S. Welch)

and then head, hands and legs or feet made of wood are inserted at the time of flowering.

Of all the forms, the only one I would even consider trying at home is *bonsaizukuri*, as its freestyle nature means that mistakes might (might!) be more repairable. Only the smallest varieties are used: the plant is trimmed and wired and pruned back until woody growth is formed. Apart from the technicalities of training, intensively grown plants are susceptible to pests and diseases and need careful watering, feeding and shading. If this sound like a challenge you'd like to accept, then I recommend you approach the National Chrysanthemum Society for more information.

You can buy specialist cultivars of chrysanthemum from nurseries such as Chrysanthemums Direct, Woolmans and Halls of Heddon.

However, if it sounds like an insane amount of effort, you could consider the medium sized スプレー (spray) or ポットマム (pot mum). The spray forms are also known as florist's mums in the UK and make excellent cut flower plants. They are tender perennials and can be grown in the ground and then brought into a greenhouse to overwinter; or you can



Figure 13: The process of 'clothing' a chrysanthemum doll by inserting individual plants and then tying and training the flowers. (Photo: 「人形に菊付けをおこなう菊師、たけふ菊人形会場にて。」 by Wikipedia user TR15336300101. Available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Craftsman_dress_chrysanthemum_on_doll.jpg)

treat them like an annual and take cuttings to regrow them each year. There are some amazing cultivars available, ranging from the subtle and classy to the extremely extravagant. You can source them from the nurseries mentioned above as well as from mainstream nurseries like Sarah Raven. Pot mums, also known as charms and patio mums, are widely available and make a reliable floral display inside, or outside until the frosts. You could buy them in the spring and grow them on yourself but at this time of year they are sometimes on sale in full flower as potted plants in the supermarket.

If, like me, you think even that sounds like far too much effort, then you are in luck because there are hardy species and cultivars which can



Figure 14: *Bonsaizukuri kiku* on display. Styles of chrysanthemum bonsai mirror the styles of traditional bonsai. (S. Welch)

be grown outdoors in the UK. These are known as ‘Korean’ or ‘rubellum’ chrysanthemums. There are at least two distinct species, but the taxonomic classification is extremely difficult, and the terms seem to be used interchangeably.

Originally, ‘Korean’ hybrids were bred in the USA using specimens of *Chrysanthemum zawadaskii* collected in Korea by Ernest Wilson (Way, 2000, p.109). The ‘rubellum’ cultivars started from a plant found at Llandudno’s Happy Valley Gardens in 1938 (Way, 2000, p.90). Since then, there has been a lot more breeding and more species are available. Regardless of the classification, all the hardy chrysanthemums are tough herbaceous perennials which you can stick in the garden and ignore until they come around to flower every year. Nurseries including Hoo House, Shire Plants and Woottens Plants have a good range. ‘Mei-Kyo’, ‘Burnt Orange’, and ‘E.H. Wilson’ are lovely varieties.

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露ながらをりてかざさむきくの花おいせぬ秋のひさしかるべく

tuyu nagara

Dew-dappled

worite kazasamu

Let us pluck and wear

kiku no Fana

Chrysanthemum blooms

oi senu aki no

That an Autumn of eternal youth

Fisasikarubeku

Should last forever!

Written by 紀友則 *Ki no Tomonori* in 古今和歌集 *Kokinwakashu* V: 270, 10th century.
<http://www.wakapoetry.net/kks-v-270/>