



# EAST MEETS WEST

Cut flowers from Japan are winning  
avid fans in Western markets.

Text and photography by Bruce Wright

IF CUSTOMERS ASK you where your cut flowers come from, you probably think first of California, Colombia, Ecuador, and Holland, in addition to any local sources. As recently as five or ten years ago, you certainly would not have thought to include Japan on the list. Today, however, Japanese growers are busy carving an important niche in the market for “boutique” flowers: hand-crafted, highest-quality blooms with special characteristics.

Surprised? The trend might seem to run counter to the bigger story that has prevailed in the past 40 years, of cut-flower



North American distributors of Japanese-grown flowers, sold through Naniwa Flower Auction in Osaka, include but are not limited to these leading suppliers:

Baisch and Skinner,  
[www.baischandskinner.com](http://www.baischandskinner.com)

Cut Flower Wholesale, Inc.,  
[www.cutflower.com](http://www.cutflower.com)

Dutch Flower Line,  
[www.dutchflowerline.com](http://www.dutchflowerline.com)

DV Flora  
[www.dvflora.com](http://www.dvflora.com)

G Page Wholesale Flowers,  
[www.gpage.com](http://www.gpage.com)

Green Mountain Florist Supply,  
[www.gmfsi.com](http://www.gmfsi.com)

Kelley Wholesale Florist,  
[www.kelleywholesale.com](http://www.kelleywholesale.com)

Mayesh Wholesale Florist,  
[www.mayesh.com](http://www.mayesh.com)

Potomac Floral Wholesale,  
[www.flowerwholesale.com](http://www.flowerwholesale.com)

A Rose by Harvest,  
[www.rosebyharvest.com](http://www.rosebyharvest.com)

on small family farms with a cooperative spirit that allows sharing of knowledge and resources.

And then, there are the twin traditions of polished craftsmanship and reverence for nature that characterize Japanese culture—a culture in which flower arranging is not just one of the decorative arts, but also a spiritual exercise and a form of meditation.

**COOL QUALITY** Cut-flower crops are shipped from Japan to North American markets and others year-round, but especially in the winter, starting in November. Summer heat can be brutal in Japan. Some crops, like tweedia, are grown in the far north, where summers are cooler, as well as in the south, and these can be shipped year-round. Others, like sweet peas and ranunculus, are shipped only during the cooler months, when the highest quality standards can be maintained.

All of Japan's cut-flower exports are

grown in greenhouses, but usually that's to protect them from rain and wind and to control the light. Heat is used to help regulate the timing of a crop like spiraea, inducing flushes in successive greenhouses to produce harvestable blooming branches over a period of two months, February through March.

Packing and shipping technology is a strong point for Japanese growers. For top products like sweet peas, scabiosa, and gloriosa, stem ends are bagged in a nutrient gel to protect against dehydration. Other flowers, like ranunculus, tweedia, and astilbe, are typically shipped with the stem ends wrapped in moist cotton.

Many of Japan's cut-flower exports are of distinctive, exclusive varieties, created by Japanese breeders (for example, ranunculus from Aya Engei) or, in the case of seed crops like sweet peas and scabiosa, resulting from lucky mutations that are then carefully guarded and nurtured by the

growers, who gather seed from their own greenhouses.

Overall, Japanese-grown cut flowers have earned a reputation for exquisite blooms with extra-long stems and extended vase life.

**LOOKING TO GROW** So far, Japan's exports make up only a tiny percentage of the country's cut-flower production—the cream of the crop. As in Holland, Japan's tradition of cut-flower commerce includes an auction system, although today, a high percentage of sales take place outside the system, via the internet. Of the three main auctions, exports pass mainly through just one, in Osaka, where Naniwa Flower Auction Co., Ltd. (Naniwa is an old name for Osaka) has become established as the leading cut-flower exporter, selling to distributors all over North America.

"Just like with premium garden roses, it may take a little while for customers to

understand the value of this product," says Jill Dahlson of Mayesh Wholesale Florist, one of those distributors. "Back in the day, people wouldn't buy a Juliet David Austin garden rose for \$3 a stem. Now we can't keep them in-house; it's a must-have. We love the Japanese product and we're committed to it. It's so special and spectacular, some of our customers combine just a little of it with other flowers and it lifts the whole presentation to a new level."

For now, sales are growing—an encouraging sign for Japan's flower farmers, who face the same challenges as do other small, family-owned businesses around the world, and who want to keep a proud tradition alive. For more information, check with your wholesale floral distributor, or with one of those listed here (opposite)—or visit the Naniwa Flower Auction Facebook page:

[www.facebook.com/naniwafloreauction.osaka.japan](http://www.facebook.com/naniwafloreauction.osaka.japan)

production moving south to countries with warm climates and lower labor costs.

There are ample reasons for Japanese success, however. To begin, parts of Japan enjoy a mild Pacific climate with ideal conditions for growing cool-weather crops. Flower growing in Japan combines the work ethic and attention to detail that thrives



The lively flower auction in Osaka, Japan, is home to Naniwa Flower Auction Co., Ltd., the leading exporter of cut flowers from Japan, including extraordinary lisianthus (above) and ranunculus (at right). Above right, Naniwa's Haruna Nishiyama holds a bundle of sweet peas, Japan's number-one cut-flower export.



## The top Japanese cut-flower exports, ranked by stem count

1. **Sweet peas** account for almost half of all cut-flower exports from Japan, with 500,000 stems shipped overseas last year. One reason for their success is that the price of Japanese sweet peas is only a little higher than for sweet peas from other sources, yet the difference in quality is notable. Although the natural flowering season for sweet peas is summer, Japanese sweet peas are shipped abroad only from November through March or April—which makes them a nice complement to sweet peas from other sources.

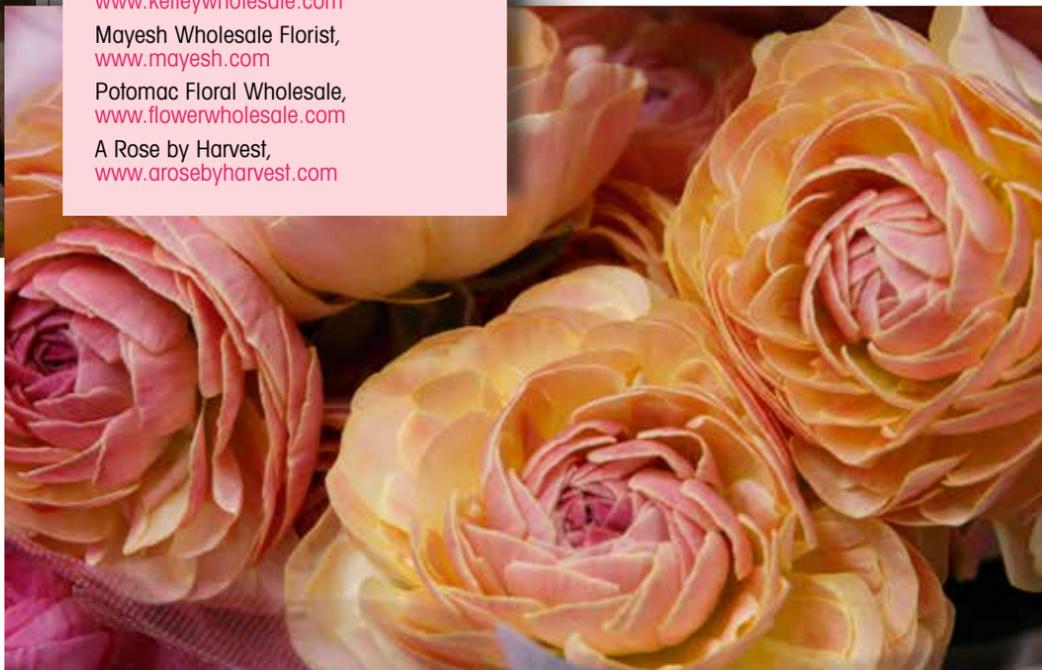
2. **Ranunculus** are likewise available from Japan only during the cooler months. This flower nonetheless ranks number two among exports with 75,000 stems.

3. **Scabiosa** is number three with 74,000 stems.

4. **Tweedia**, available year-round in blue, white, and pink, is number four with 70,000 stems.

5. **Gloriosa**, available year-round, ranks number five by stem count with 40,000 stems. See this month's Fresh Focus article, page 22.

Numbers six through eleven include **Crispy Wave**, a specialty foliage with wavy edges; **chocolate cosmos**; **astilbe**; **gentiana**; **lisianthus** (available year-round, but in peak supply November through June), and **spiraea** (February through April). Other Japanese exports include roses, curcuma, sandersonia, and epidendrum orchids. Foliages include smilax and eucalyptus.



Japan is known not only for high quality but also for exclusive varieties, like sweet peas in the Shikibu series at center left, with bicolored blossoms available in purple, wine, and pink. Scabiosa (above) and tweedia (at near left, available in white and pink as well as blue) are two other specialties, while epidendrum orchids (this page, lower left) are among summer exports.