

Asagao Matsuri: History

The annual Asagao Matsuri or Morning Glory Festival is a staple of the calendar in the Iriya neighborhood, attracting up to 400,000 people over its three-day run in July. The festival celebrates Iriya's history as a center of the flower industry, which flourished in the area from the mid-1800s until the early Taisho era (1912–1926). In those days, the Iriya lowland off the eastern edge of the Ueno plateau was known for its rich soil and large number of commercial gardens. Plant breeders at these gardens competed to produce ever more impressive varieties of flowers, with the morning glory one of their most popular subjects of experimentation. Breeders exhibited their achievements at annual flower markets, which at the height of their popularity, in the early 1890s, attracted so many visitors that traffic ground to a halt in the neighborhood.

Economic hardships and changing tastes in the 1910s and 1920s led to the decline of the flower industry. Iriya's morning glory market faded from the popular imagination, and at the end of World War II, the neighborhood was completely destroyed by firebombing. The morning glories inspired the later effort to overcome this tragedy. In 1948, only three years after the end of the war, the local people came together and revived the flower market to celebrate their city's rebirth. The Morning Glory Festival has been held every year since and now takes place from July 6 to 8. The action centers on Iriya Kishimojin temple, where about 50 flower stalls are set up from 5 o'clock in the morning. The morning glories on sale these days are mainly of the familiar round type, rather than the imaginative varieties popular back in the 1800s.