

Asagao Matsuri: About Japanese Morning Glories

The *asagao* or Japanese morning glory is so named because it blooms in the early morning. The flower's history in Japan goes back more than a thousand years. It was most likely brought into the country in the eighth century, when Japanese missions to Tang China imported all sorts of knowledge, goods, and germs from the continent. In those days the *asagao* was mainly grown for medicinal purposes and its seeds, ground and ingested as a laxative, were very expensive.

It was not until the Edo period (1603–1868) that the morning glory became widely recognized for its ornamental properties. In Edo (present-day Tokyo), low-ranking samurai in the Okachimachi area just south of Ueno pioneered the cultivation of *asagao*, often enlisting the help of plant breeders from Iriya. These horticulturalists took over completely after 1867, when the samurai-led Tokugawa government was deposed and the swordsmen of Okachimachi, having lost their livelihoods as samurai, suddenly had more pressing matters to attend to.

The morning glory remains a popular flower in Japan today, in part because it has become part of the curriculum at many elementary schools. Most first-graders grow their own morning glories during their first months at school, taking the plant home for watering during summer vacation. Many schools also require students to keep observation diaries and record changes in their flower's appearance.