

## **Yanaka Kiku Matsuri: History**

The chrysanthemum (*kiku*) has a long and distinguished history in Japan. Imported from China over a thousand years ago, this autumn flower is as significant a seasonal icon as the cherry blossom (*sakura*) is to spring. The chrysanthemum has adorned the imperial family crest since the thirteenth century and is a symbol of the state, depicted on everything from the Japanese passport to the 50-yen coin. Chrysanthemum-growing is a popular hobby, with enthusiasts displaying their flowers at various kinds of chrysanthemum festivals (*kiku matsuri*). Usually held in October, these festivals often have roots reaching back into the Edo period (1603–1868).

That is also true of the annual Yanaka Kiku Matsuri, a festival first held in 1984 to revive a traditional event called Dangozaka no Kikuningyo (“Chrysanthemum Dolls of Dangozaka”). That celebration, a popular staple of autumn in Yanaka until 1910, featured mannequins dressed in “clothes” made from chrysanthemum blossoms. These floral figures provided an eye-catching way to exhibit the flowers grown by Yanaka’s many professional horticulturists, who ran shops catering to the needs of visitors to the neighborhood’s many Buddhist temples and their adjacent cemeteries. Today, besides a display of *kikuningyo*, the Yanaka Kiku Matsuri program includes sales of potted chrysanthemums, food and drink stalls, a parade, and night-time performances of *gagaku* (traditional court music).