

Matsumoto's "Space Azalea"

This azalea bush sprouted from a seed that traveled to outer space. On July 8, 1994, the seed was brought aboard the NASA Space Shuttle Columbia by heart surgeon and astronaut Mukai Chiaki (b. 1952), the first Japanese woman in space. Mukai was allowed to bring mementos from her hometown of Tatebayashi, in southeastern Gunma Prefecture. She took the city's flag, along with seeds from a 500-year-old azalea bush to represent the city symbol, the azalea flower.

After two weeks in space, Mukai returned to Tatebayashi with the azalea seeds, and they were divided among several universities and botanical research centers for planting and observation. The seeds were sprouted without difficulty, and the time spent in zero gravity did not seem to have affected them. In 1998, these well-traveled seeds and the azaleas grown from them were registered under the trademark "Space Azalea" (*uchū tsutsuji*) in commemoration of their journey.

In 2000, Tatebayashi hosted the annual Fill the World with Flowers convention. Fill the World with Flowers (*Hana ippai undō*) is a nationwide movement that originated in Matsumoto in 1952, when a local elementary school teacher named Komatsu Isamu began encouraging people to plant flowers to combat the town's post-war devastation. Nearly 50 years later, Tatebayashi donated this Space Azalea to Matsumoto to commemorate the founding of the movement.