THE UMÈ OR PLUM-FLOWER BELONGS TO THE HISTORY, LITERATURE AND ART OF JAPAN—IT IS CELEBRATED IN THE SHO-GATSU, THE JANUARY GOOD WILL FESTIVAL: BY MARY FENOLLOSA

The Japanese year is a calendar of flowers, first and most beloved of which is the umè, intolerably named by us, “the plum.”

It is an injustice to ourselves, no less than to the Japanese, that many of their most beautiful and characteristic plants have been thus irretrievably labeled for the Occident with utilitarian and misleading names. The national sakura, with its wonder of pink, fruitless efflorescence, is tersely called by us a “cherry.” It has just as much relation to the edible cherry as rose-apples have to pies. The exquisite, thorny bokè, in its varieties of single and double florets of crimson, white, salmon, and pink, is ticketed loosely “Japan Quince.” The Japanese have real quinces in plenty. They stew and make jelly of the green, pear-shaped objects just as we do, and buy them in the market as kari, but these have not the faintest connection with the bokè. A marvelous flowering momo, with blossoms like tea-roses tied in clusters all along a thick, green wand, is “peach.” But worst of all—the umè—that flower of symbolism, culture, legend, and poetry—having been once termed by some pragmatic Englishman a “plum,” must remain, I suppose, a plum, as long as vegetation endures.

Of the many Japanese festivals none equals in importance the bright, three-day celebration of Sho-gatsu, at the opening of the year. Before the last night of the old season comes, all business debts must be paid, all family differences settled, and the houses themselves scoured and swept to the tiniest corner where dust—or a lingering imp of bad luck—might be in hiding. The New Year sun is supposed to
rise upon an immaculate community. The umè, being as it were a part of this happy festival, is a symbol of congratulation and good will.

But aside from Sho-gatsu, the umè is, to the people, essentially a classic flower, sprung from the Golden Age of China's past. We have something of the same feeling toward the narcissus, the Grecian myrtle, and the pomegranate. For old China is to Japan, Greece and Rome in one.

The date of the actual bringing over of the umè is not known. In the earliest collection of Japanese poems, the Manyoshu, published in the eighth century of our era, many allusions to them as to a plant already loved and known are found. One charming stanza, done into English by Mr. Aston, says:—

"On the plum-blossoms
Thick fell the snow.
I wished to gather some to show thee
But it melted in my hands."

This dainty conception of the snow on plum-flowers, so intermingled in fragile beauty and in faint, chill fragrance that one is mistaken for the other, is a favorite among the Japanese, and is often met with in later verse.

But we flower-lovers care little for our own classic origins, much less for those of a strange land. Let us speak of the little plum trees growing in pots, to be seen at this moment, by thousands, in Tokio; or old, old gardens of plums, yet to be visited. Resident foreigners have become adherents of the plum-cult, not so much from appreciation of what the flower means to national life, as "for simple beauty, and naught else."

Of the potted plums, each separate one is a creation, an artistic study, not only with regard to blossoming qualities, to color and form of growth, but because the combined effect is always in harmonious relation to the pot in which the plant grows. The size, shape, and color of the glazed vessels are also terms, as it were, in which the artist gardener creates. I recall a translucent salmon-pink bush, springing like an ecstatic young geyser from a tall pot of silvery blue, and a mysterious yellow-green apparition of bloom set in a wide, flat bowl of jade
that seemed to draw forth new beauty from a color already unusual.

In size these compositions range from pigmy gardens in a flat porcelain dish where the tallest plum—gnarled and lichen-covered too—stands some ten inches in height, to a great weeping willow of an umè tree, twenty feet high, in a brown glazed jar five feet across the mouth. But those of medium size in decorated pots are the favorites of foreigners. Remaining in bloom for many weeks, they are ideal table ornaments, and also for the drawing-room.

Some of us had the temerity to “collect” them, and for a season talked learnedly of the different colors, shapes, and names; but after the first summer we found that they needed to be sent back to their wizard parent, the gardener, there to be coaxed into new buds. These buds are indeed the jewels with which Japanese poetry so often compares them. Perfectly round, smooth, and set close against a lichen-silvered bark, they have the look of pearls, garnets, topaz, chryso-phrase, rubies, and pink amethysts. The size of the average blossom is about that of a wedding ring, though special varieties are made to produce a much larger kind. These, an old Chinese poet has called “great coins of beauty.” Sometimes the florets conserve a half-opened shape, like a small cup, and then one has to peer down into a little golden nest of stamens. Others are wide and flat, like a wild rose.

It is said that there are five hundred varieties—should one happen to care for statistics. In color alone the gradations are almost endless, for not only do the petals themselves vary in texture, color, amount of doubling and manner of growth, but the sheathing calyx underneath them may be silver-green, deep-green, white, yellowish-green, red, bronze, and so on through hundreds of modifications. The more usual tones of the petal are white, crimson, and pink, through various degrees, but I have seen a clear, faint yellow plum-flower, thin and crumpled like a poppy leaf, and greenish, “tea-colored” blooms, and spectral blue flowers that shone with an almost unearthly beauty.

As for the fragrance of the umè—there is nothing else in the world like it. If I were forced to give a recipe, using comparatively gross materials, the formula would be something like this:—

Two ounces La France rose, grown out of doors, and with dew on it; one scruple lemon-peel; one ounce odor of opening water-lily; one ounce deep red carnation fragrance; one ounce moonlight; one ounce Chopin’s music; delight in it—no scruples at all!
This may sound exaggerated and absurd; but it is just the way the plum flower makes a person feel. If it were possible for one's soul to get drunk through one's nose, a growing tree of the wine-colored umè is the thing to avoid. Plums have done strange things to men. Here is a story told me by a friend from Idzumo.

There was a young artist who had a single plum tree. It was tall, five feet at least, of the drooping-willow form, and with flowers the color of crystal held under sea-water. It grew in a cheap, earth-colored pot—for the artist was poor—and its fragrance matched the wonder of its look. He said that, at night, when he spoke its name, the fragrance turned to a strange, blue light, so that the tree, in its whole length, glowed faintly. At any rate, he went mad for love of it, and he swore that, at last, at the one hour of midnight, because of his great love, it became a maiden who returned his love. They found him, one gray February morning, dead, at the foot of the still blossoming tree. They buried him in the temple yard, with the umè close beside him. The grave is still shown to pilgrims. Near it leans an old, old umè tree. The village people say that even yet, at the midnight hour, a faint blue light flickers among the branches. Perhaps it does.

There are old plum groves and gardens dating back for centuries, and to most of these foreigners may gain access—but not to all. After years of residence he (or she)—if they have proved themselves worthy in Japanese eyes—may, at the blossoming season, be taken into some quiet, hedge-protected treasury of beauty, that is the special care and pride of a world-famous figure—warrior, statesman, or poet. There has always been a curious analogy between the order of mind that makes for greatness, in the Far East, and the temperament which finds its joy and relaxation in the tending of garden plants, particularly the umè. Field Marshal Marquis Yamagata, Marquis Ito, and Admiral Togo, with doubtless many others of their kind, are acknowledged lovers of the plum, and it is said of grim old Togo the Silent that he once carried this love to the extent of having several thousand dwarf plants sent to his camp in the Liau-Tung Peninsula that his fighting men might be heartened by the presence of beauty.

An old, gnarled trunk, seemingly in decay, with yet a perfect sunburst of green twigs and rosy flowers, symbolizes to such minds the
deathless quality of youth, beauty, and art. The drooping form is spoken of as “Silver Ghost of a Willow Under the Moon,” or, “Slow Falling Fountain of Perfume,” or, perhaps, “Osier Cage of Nightingales.” An old tree, rough-barked, leaning angular branches, like elbows, down to earth, is called, “Crouching Dragon Plum.” A more delicate variety, full of thin, crossing twigs, and restless tangents of bloom, is termed, “Waves of the Hillside Bamboo Grass.” An individual tree, much loved, is given a name like a person, and is spoken of in the owner’s home as a member of the family. These names have generally a classic or poetical origin, as if we were to call some favorite shrub, that once a year covers itself with whiteness, “Leda’s Swan,” or an old crouching tree, Fafner.

And not only are the characteristic features of a plant thus noted and enhanced, but they are often deliberately trained to represent an abstract thought, a poetic allusion, or the mannerism of a special artist—even a school of artists. A smooth-bark tree, with round spots of lichen and infrequent but enormous blooms of white, would be inevitably a Korin. One sees this very growth on screen or villa wall. Those gray, metallic twigs lie, in dull silver, across many a lacquered box; while the flat, unmodulated discs of bloom are already of mother-of-pearl, waiting to be transferred. Again we are shown a Dragon Plum, fresh from the brush of Sesshu who died four centuries ago. For the later generations we find the springing, upward growth, loved of Hoyen; or the broad, snow-massed branches of Okio.

On the Kine-gawa (Kine River) a few miles to the north of Tokio, stands the villa, or bes-so, of Count Katsu, inherited by him through many generations. In lieu of the more usual composition of shrubs, sand, stones, and water, it is surrounded by an old plum grove into which surely the ghost of Kano Tanyu must come by night to wander. Whether or not Tanyu himself had part in the inception of this garden, I was not able to learn. Each tree, however, is trained and pruned into exactly the broad, spikey lines that Tanyu would have drawn on temple screen, or palace wall. And not only is each tree trained to be beautiful in itself, but also in relation to all neighboring trees, so that the whole becomes a great mural composition, in terms of trunk, limb, and flower, against an azure or a cloudy sky. The falling of a petal has a look of unreality. Even the divine fragrance, solvent in the thin, chill air, can not enforce actuality.
THUS far I have spoken chiefly of the outward semblance of the umè flower, its colors, forms, fragrance, and many manners of growth. Being, as I said, the first blossoming plant of the year and thus identified with the festival of Sho-gatsu, it becomes one of the national symbols of good luck and congratulation. But aside from this obvious connotation it has meaning upon meaning, countless delicate suggestions and symbolisms known only to scholars and poets. In the mind of the average Japanese it is most closely associated with feminine sweetness, beauty, and chastity. For this reason—plus that of congratulation—it is an indispensable element in all wedding decorations. If the actual flowers are not in bloom, artificial ones are used, just as our brides use orange blossoms.

The umè is not, however, employed as a personal adornment. The whole small tree will be mimicked, standing on a little wooden platform with its inalienable companions, the pine tree and the bamboo—both in miniature. These three have come down through the centuries to symbolize all that is desirable. No one seems to know the origin, though any street child in Japan will tell you that Sho-chiku-bai—(pine-bamboo-plum) means good luck and happiness. Perhaps it came from the teachings of that old Buddhist sect of contemplation, called the Zen, where every aspect of the outer world is but a reflection of some phase of human will or character. Perhaps it reaches even farther back, through China, into ancient India. The Japanese themselves know only certain accepted facts of modern symbolism.

The pine tree stands for masculine strength, endurance, loyalty, and longevity. The plum is feminine, and in its fundamental meanings of sweetness and chastity, stands for domestic joy. The bamboo has qualities of both, with an especial significance of moral rectitude. Grace it possesses, swaying far over at the touch of the lightest wind; its beauty has been dwelt upon by generations of Japanese and Chinese artists. Though pliant and yielding it never breaks. Sometimes in the great tempests, called in the Far East typhoons, both pine and plum will go crashing down, and the slender bamboo, prone upon earth while the wind is in its fury, will soon spring upright. Therefore the three, endurance, sweetness, and strength-in-yielding, make a trinity of virtues that seem to the Japanese absolutely satisfying.

In the countless poems hung in spring-time to the branches of the umè, the greater number contain allusion to the absent members of
the triumvirate, the pine and the bamboo; and in paintings of the plum, especially in past centuries when the Zen and Chinese influences were more vital, pine and bamboo were sure to find a place. No temple or palace garden was complete without the three, and if the master bent with a more personal love over his umè flowers, it was almost as if he delighted in a fair daughter or gentle wife. In love-songs women are constantly likened to the blossoms of the white plum. History and drama are filled with stories and imagery from this classic plant.

ONE of the best-known legends is that of Michizanè and his “Flying-Plum.” Michizanè was a great writer, thinker, and statesman of the ninth century, a time when the Kioto palace was given over to culture and to political intrigue. Being acknowledged leader of one party, he very naturally had bitter enemies; and these, at the very height of his power, succeeded in turning the heart of the Emperor from him, and in obtaining a decree of instant banishment.

Just at the corner of his splendid home, leaning above a balcony where he had loved to sit, grew a white plum-tree that was Michizanè’s special pride and care. To this tree his last farewell was spoken:—

\begin{verbatim}
Idetè naba  
Nushi naki yado to  
Narinu tomo  
Nokiba no umè yo  
Haru wo wasuruna!
\end{verbatim}

It is really worth while trying to read these Japanese words aloud, giving continental pronunciation to all vowels, to get something of the velvet softness and pathos inherent in the lines.

This translation I have attempted in exact Japanese metre, but with English rhyming:—

\begin{verbatim}
Though disgraced and poor  
I, in exile wandering  
See my home no more—  
Plum-tree, by my empty door,  
O, forget not thou the spring!
\end{verbatim}
Arrived at last at the wretched hut in the distant, arid north country to which his enemies had doomed him, Michizanè stood alone without the door, with no courage to open it. Night was closing in. For all his philosophy, loneliness and despair crept near with the darkness. "If there were one thing here that I could love—If but I had my plum-tree!" Michizanè cried aloud.

At this moment, looking upward, he saw a strange object like a huge, shaggy bird flying in the air. It was the plum-tree, which descended swiftly toward him, alighted at the corner of the house corresponding to the one in Kioto, settled itself at a familiar angle in the earth, and went on serenely blossoming as if nothing at all had happened. The good Michizanè died a year later, still in disgrace and exile. The fact that he has since been worshiped as a deity—as the Japanese God of Learning—couldn't have been of much comfort just then. I love to feel that the plum-tree was near him!

With every favorite shrub and tree the Japanese—as the Chinese before them—connect a month, a festival, and also some bird or beast or insect. The wistaria has its swallows; under the graceful hagi bush the young deer lies; on the water-reed perches the iridescent dragon-fly, or the twinkling hotaru or fire-fly; the eagle has his place upon the pine, and wind is the companion of the tall bamboo. To the umè flower, tradition and poetry give the nightingale. Its liquid, enchanting voice is sometimes said to be the perfume of the plum made audible. Since it sings very early in the season, its song is called the melting of frozen tears.

The ungüise and the umè flower! These are images indeed with which to conjure poetry, and Japan is a nation of poets!

Perhaps, in centuries, our golden-rod and Indian maize will be jewel-encrusted with rich fancies. The little May-flower bears already a faint halo of illusion about each new-discovered cluster. Our fragrant wild grapes, our maples and red oaks of autumn, these are more than worthy to stand in the king's treasury of thought, but many years must pass before they are well established.

In Japan it is, and for centuries has been, a commonplace, that everything connected with life becomes thereby poetical. Like the Greeks, whatever they touch becomes beautiful. Poems are even to-day cast in the iron of their tea kettles, burnt on the leather of
"THE COMPANION OF THE
UME IS THE NIGHTINGALE"
AN OLD CHINESE POET HAS CALLED THE
PLUM BLOSSOMS "GREAT COINS OF BEAUTY"
From a Modern Japanese Print

“A NIGHTINGALE SINGING IN THE BRANCHES”
PLUM BLOSSOMS ARE A FAVORITE DECORATION FOR THE CORRIDORS OF FOREIGN BUNGALOWS
Photograph of a Painting by Hoyen

"THE SPRINGING, UPWARD GROWTH, LOVED OF HOYEN"
TOP OF AN UME TREE, SHOWING THE GRAFTING OF NEW TWIGS ON OLD WOOD
"THE DROOPING FORM OF THE WILLOW PLUM IS OFTEN SPOKEN OF AS THE 'SILVER GHOST OF A WILLOW UNDER THE MOON'"
Blossoms of medium size in clear white, pink, and deep crimson, grown in decorated pots, are "collected" by foreigners.
sandal-straps, written down the slivers of orange-wood they use for

tooth picks, dyed into garments of common wear, and intaglioed into

the very wooden rafters of their homes. To such a people, conceive

then the significance of an umè tree in full, fragrant bloom, with a

nightingale singing in the branches!

AFTER FIFTEEN YEARS

THE hills are not so high as once they were,
And the old woods that seemed so dark and vast
In those remembered child days of the past,
Are only a few trees that now confer
In whispers of the curious wayfarer

Who stands and gazes so. The young trees cast
Shy glances at me; they were sprouts when last
I questioned them, and they were tenderer.

The gray old empty house is like a dream
That haunts the memory in the clear noonday.
The silent room of birth is tenanted
By disembodied yearnings, and they seem
Vaguely to know that I have found the way
To something unimagined by the dead.

—Elsa Barker.