The Japanese Nursery Business in the Bay Area

The history of the Japanese flower business in the Bay Area goes back nearly as far as the beginning of Japanese history in the United States. Beginning in 1884, the Japanese nursery industry in Oakland was an important part of a thriving community in economic and political aspects as well as in cultural and familial ways. Japanese involvement in floriculture had influences far beyond the Japanese community and the Bay Area, affecting the flower industry across the nation. The Japanese were able to find a niche market and dominate it. As Gary Kawaguchi says of the Japanese in the nursery business: “They left their indelible stamps on the industry worldwide, Issei, men and women, had the farthest ranging vision of how the industry would grow, the greatest love of challenge and risk and the luck to start at the bottom floor” (Kawaguchi 1993:ix).

The flower industry in the San Francisco Bay Area began during the 1850s when successful prospectors and other nouveau riche had an excess of wealth and an eagerness to spend. Flowers were no longer luxury items but instead expected adornments in hotels and restaurants (Kawaguchi 1995). Flowers also played an important part in funerals, weddings, and births, rituals that spanned all classes of people. Ornamental plants also gained popularity over the years, increasing after the development of Golden Gate Park that was lauded by the San Francisco Chronicle as “the inspiration of the people toward what is beautiful in outdoor life” (Kawaguchi 1995:31). Also according to the San Francisco Chronicle, at the turn of the century San Franciscans spent more on flowers per capita than anywhere else in the U.S. (Kawaguchi 1995:31).

It was during the rise of flower popularity that the Domoto brothers first arrived in California from Japan. The first brother landed in San Francisco in November 1884 and three of his brothers soon followed (Kawaguchi 1993). The brothers were renting land in Oakland by 1885 and had built nurseries to grow chrysanthemums, carnations and garden plants and trees. The Domotos are credited for being the first in northern California to commercially produce a variety of different garden plants such as camellias, wisterias, azaleas, and lily bulbs imported from Japan (Yagasaki 1978). Their business continued to grow and, in 1892, the brothers bought 0.8 ha (2 ac.) in the Melrose district on Central Avenue and East 14th Street, possibly making them the first Japanese to own land in the United States (Kawaguchi 1993; Murase 2001). In the next few years the Domotos expanded their business, adding several new flower species to their production, and buying the parcel of land next to their nursery.

The original Domoto Nursery was located not far from the High Street Tract. The first reference found to a nursery in our project area was a 1912 city directory listing for T. Katoh at 4501 Clement Street. By 1917 the Block Books show a greenhouse at this location and in 1920 T. Yoshioka operated a vegetable farm on the property. Within a few years numerous Japanese families operated nurseries in the area and did so until their forced relocation in 1942.
The 1906 earthquake was one of many setbacks that the flower industry survived. Because of their role in rituals of celebration as well as tragedy, flowers were essential during all seasons of life. World War I and the influenza epidemic that immediately followed saw a spike in flower sales and prices. The Japanese flower growers enjoyed continued success in the years after the war, producing 70 percent of the major greenhouse flowers and chrysanthemums in Northern California in 1929 (Kawaguchi 1993). Japanese nurseries were at the height of their success when the stock market crashed on October 28, 1929.

The Great Depression affected the entire nation, including Japanese flower growers. However, the flower growers were more fortunate than many other Japanese businessmen, especially farmers. Because the Japanese nursery industry had been established so long ago a great number of flower growers owned land they had purchased before the Alien Land Laws. Japanese farmers, on the other hand, more frequently leased land and were more susceptible to debt. Overall, the flower growers were less indebted because they relied less on credit and leases. But the ripple effects of the stock market crash reached them as well and the depression years were full of frugality and lean living that not all were able to sustain.

Business was steadily improving when Japanese flower growers—along with all people of Japanese descent in the U.S.—had their lives turned upside down by the aftermath of the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941. In the months that followed the nation was taken over by panic and hysteria. This resulted in President Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9066 that allowed for the forceful removal and internment of over 110,000 people of Japanese descent, two thirds of whom were U.S. citizens.

People were first rounded up into assembly centers before they were transferred to one of ten relocation camps in seven states. Evacuees were given between two weeks to only a few days to settle their businesses, pack only what they could carry, and leave their homes for an unknown destination for an unknown amount of time. Nursery owners frantically tried to find either buyers or caretakers for their businesses, losing substantial amounts of money as they sold greenhouses, equipment, and land at staggeringly low prices (Taylor 1993:55). Many flower growers who wanted to keep their businesses entered into bad contracts or leased their nurseries to untrustworthy caretakers. Oftentimes these caretakers would neglect their obligations, leaving the nurseries in disrepair, crops unsalvageable, and equipment and personal property missing (Kawaguchi 1993:58). Many nurseries, however, did survive the internment of their owners because of the generous efforts of neighbors, friends, and fellow nursery owners who maintained the nurseries for the Japanese growers while they were interned.