

Brief History of Research Botanical Gardens in Japan – (1) Koishikawa Botanical Garden

Jin Murata

Botanical Gardens, Graduate School of Science, The University of Tokyo
3-7-1, Hakusan, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo 112-0001, Japan

Summary

The Botanical Gardens, Graduate School of Science, The University of Tokyo consist of the main gardens in midtown of Tokyo and the branch gardens in Nikko, Tochigi Prefecture. Both of them have long been opened to the public and are generally referred to as the Koishikawa Botanical Garden and the Nikko Botanical Garden, respectively. They have facilities and wild plant collections to contribute to research and education in plant sciences and together have been a leading research botanical garden in Japan.

The Koishikawa Gardens originated as the Koishikawa Medicinal Herb Garden, which was established in 1684 by the Tokugawa Shogunate. Various collections of medicinal plants were intensively introduced both from Japan and abroad and tons of herbal medicines were produced every year to contribute to the Shogunate and for the public. It is well known that the “Koishikawa Yojosho”, a charitable hospital, was placed in the garden and supplied medical care for poor. The experimental cultivation of sweet potato was also accomplished in the garden. There are many historic plants and ruins that indicate the long history of the Botanical Gardens.

After the Meiji Restoration, the Botanical Gardens were very fortunately annexed to the University (the current University of Tokyo) in 1877 and soon associated with the laboratory of botany to become the birthplace of modern scientific research in botany in Japan. On the basis of the material accumulated in the Garden the flora of Japan was studied by the staff of the Gardens and laboratory of botany, such as Ryokichi Yatabe, Keisuke Ito, Tomitaro Makino and Jinzo Matsumura, and many new species as well as some distinct genera were described. The most remarkable finding of spermatozoid from gymnosperms was made by Sakugoro Hirase, a research associate of the Department of Botany, in 1896 using the seeds of an old Ginkgo tree in the Gardens. Since 1897 the laboratories of the Department of Botany were placed in the Gardens until it moved to the main Hongo campus of the University in 1935/

The history in the 20th century and the present status of the scientific activities of the Botanical Gardens will be described in the following chapters next time.