

Meeting the Master

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It's 6:30am and I'm sharing the back seat of a tiny car with Fred Hooks and Rick Crowder, two exceptional, and physically substantial, fellow plantsmen. We're screaming up the winding road along the side of Mt. Ena, an approximately 6000' mountain outside Nagoya, Japan. It's pouring rain (and even a little snow), the clouds are 5' off the ground and I've had about 6 hours of sleep over the last three nights. I think I might even be wearing yesterday's socks.

That was the initial entry in my journal for 11/22/09 during a whirlwind plant collecting trip to Japan, a trip that was filled with many surprises. Our goal on that cold and rainy day was to visit Mr. Seiju Yamaguchi, legendary seed collector and plantsman who is known for his tremendous knowledge of both Chinese and Japanese plant species.

When that tiny car finally wheeled into Yamaguchi Nursery and we de-sardined ourselves, we were greeted by the master, full of energy and entirely lacking any appreciation for our lack of sleep or legroom. We spent the morning bouncing and sifting through an amazing array of plants, including *Halesia macgregori*, variegated *Corylopsis glabrescens*, purple-fruited *Viburnum dilatatum* and more. A five-gallon bucket of *Magnolia obovata* seed, collected from the local Mt. Ena (2197 m tall, according to our rather precise host!) would have made most MSI members green with envy. Did I mention the extremely dwarf *M. obovata* in Mr. Y's greenhouse? Unfortunately it is not yet propagated....

The last seed bucket was apparently held back intentionally, for a final grand flourish. It seems our host has spent the last 46 years searching the Japanese countryside for seed of *Pseudotsuga japonica*, and talk about being in the right place at the right time, this was the year he just happened to find a tree with a few cones about 100 ft. off the ground. How many of us would have lost interest or impulsion after far less time? How many of us would have offered our oldest child for just a handful of that seed?



Mr. Yamaguchi sharing tales of collecting *Pseudotsuga japonica* seed after 40+ years of looking.

Magnolia

Following a trek through the nursery, we entered Mr. Yamaguchi's office. It had the air of a lifetime spent searching, mapping, documenting, collecting and conserving everything to do with cell walls: topo maps on the walls, cases of map books, reference books, and, on the middle of the table,

two black binders; binders of letters from all around the world sent to this humble office about 15 years ago. It seems that way back when I was at the University of Maine, fellow magnoliaphile Barry Yinger wrote to me, and to a long list of other plant lovers, hoping our letterheads might carry some political weight, if our signatures didn't do the same. Barry's request was for letters of support to be written and sent to a gentleman in Japan who was fighting a major battle with a large corporate entity bent on building a country club right in the middle of one of the richest remaining *Magnolia stellata* habitats in Japan.



A river valley below Mt. Ena; one of the locations where *M. stellata* can be found in the wild.

It seems I sat down and wrote that letter and dropped it in the mail, but for some reason, I have this innate tendency to, well, just plain forget things – and this must have been one of those things. But as soon as I saw those binders and the *M. stellata* conservation report, arranged prominently and purposefully on the table, all the once-lost pieces finally started to fall into place. My 15-year-old letter was there as plain as day; despite our language barrier, I suspect he knew the whole time, and was just waiting, patiently, and with an old-world sense of hospitality, for me to reassemble the puzzle in my own time. And for the rest of the trip, despite the double-flowered *M. maudiae*, the double pink *M. obovata*, and even the yellow-fruited *Euscaphis*, I knew that black binder would be hard to beat.

Final note – In checking with Barry Yinger, this battle over *M. stellata* appears to be the only instance where MSI took an institutional stand of this type, and even more unusual is that it was a rare instance where a major Japanese corporate entity backed down from a publicly stated plan!

Hurray for the *magnolia*!