

Shussho

There seems to be less greenery to enjoy lately, and we seldom have a chance to observe plants growing in the wild. Perhaps you remember running in a grassy field or along a river, grass seeds clinging to your clothes. If you tripped, you suddenly found yourself on the ground looking up, with the grasses and flowers above bathed in sunlight and stretching skyward. There was the clinging smell of grass and cut stems in the oppressive summer heat. Yet not long after the tiny flowers had suddenly gone limp in autumn's first chill. Nature teaches us about change. Even without knowing specific plant names, you learned to distinguish each one by its growing form.

A plant buds and grows, blooms and withers. Its essential, inner nature is called *shussho*. When you first begin to study, one part of your teacher's advice can be quite confusing. "Think carefully of the *shussho* of that plant before arranging it." Looking puzzled, you try to discover the meaning of the word by comparing it to something in your own life. Your family tree? Birthplace? Residence, sex or maiden name? In matters like these, but for plants, maybe a gardening reference will help, to find out which family the flower belongs to and where it comes from.

To understand a person's uniqueness, we need to know more than just details of that person's family. What experiences, and what people, helped this person to bloom

uniquely? We must make an effort to know the other person's heart, truly coming to know the person over a long time. Even then, we can never understand everything.

With plants and flowers, a reference guide can be useful for finding the scientific name of the plant and other basic information. However, I hope you will understand that the same effort required to know people is indeed required to truly know plants and flowers.

Since plants are originally from the wild, a green house or pot plant is really a special case. Given how we live in contemporary society, what can we really call natural? Even now, a visit to the country or mountains is the best way to learn about nature. In cities crowded with buildings, we can see only the trees planted along the street, or floral materials grown specifically for the florist.

Ginkgo trees are often planted at street-side in Japan. The fan-shaped leaves unfold in spring just like a new baby's hand, and they become greener as the season progresses. With the arrival of clear autumn skies and chilly weather, the leaves turn many shades of yellow. As some fall to the pavement, closer inspection reveals them to be not only yellow, but also mottled.

Both ginkgo and maple are deciduous trees. Normally, leaves at the top of the tree are most exposed to the sun and elements. These upper leaves turn color first, with

color progressing gradually to the lower branches. With this progression in mind, the *denka* or traditional teaching for a *rikka* of maple speaks of a gradation from red leaves at the top of the work to greener leaves toward the base. In the city, however, exhaust fumes or other factors can change what would happen in the wild. At the height of summer, we sometimes hear the rustling sound of already-dry sweet gum leaves.

Cosmos is one of my favorite autumn flowers. Cosmos is really an introduced species in Japan, brought here in the late 1800s. Cosmos seems well adapted to Japanese surroundings and sensibilities, seeming almost to surpass native flowers in its ability to suggest that autumn will soon arrive. In July, next to the platform of a small train station in Japan's north, cosmos sway in the breeze with gentle elegance, quietly telling us of the season of come.

In the wild, cosmos flowers are quite small, and the wind sometimes gives the stems broad curves that, even on a quiet day, show us where the wind has moved. A delicate plant at first site, cosmos has the strength to weather even the strongest autumn gales. The tips of wind-bent stems always curve up anew. Cosmos in the wild have net-like leaves, varied on the same plant from green to shades of yellow, decaying near the ground. The leaves alone show us the life of the plant. Cosmos at the florist, however, tend to be bright and large-flowered, with rather straight stems. Glancing around at the other flowers in the shop, the straight-stemmed cosmos resemble everything else. Although in the course of my work I often have to use cosmos out of season, in my heart I would really rather be arranging autumn cosmos from the wild. All that lives and grows in the city is influenced by the city, still

natural in its own way, but different from the wild.

All plants and flowers are natural. But with those grown commercially I want you to consider how the plant would originally have grown in nature, as you try to find out how each stem and flower can be arranged most beautifully. Is there something unnatural about how you have arranged the stem? All living things share some characteristics, including the strength to return to an original form even if subjected to some extraneous influence. For example, you often shape or curve stems (we use the verb *tameru* to describe this action) as you arrange. Even having done so, however, the stem will always tend to return to its original line, to its original form as determined by its *shussho*. This holds true not only for plants growing out in the open light. It holds also for the tiny ferns growing in deep shade at the base of a tree in the mountains, and for the green aspidistra which graced the shady corners of many a garden until recently.

In our ikebana today we often use orchids and other imported varieties. Where are these materials from, and what natural surroundings influenced their growth and bloom? Travel is often enjoyed as a chance to go shopping, but taking time during your journey to see how the materials on display at your florist grow in nature is an exploration that can bring many surprises. You have a chance to come to know a plant's *shussho*.

Bringing what is natural to the stem you are arranging really begins with knowing its *shussho*. If you know a plant's *shussho*, your shaping or trimming will not be careless.

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