

Living with flowers

'Flowers, birds, wind and moon' (花鳥風月 *kachōfūgetsu*) is a Japanese term which embodies the beauty of nature and it has been a major theme in Japanese literature, particularly poetry. Flowers, the first element, mark the passage of seasons especially well, so they are loved not just for their beauty, colour or fragrance, but also for the emotions they provoke.

A love of flowers is probably as old as humankind. In Japan, traditional flower arranging called ikebana has been raised to an art form. (Indeed you will often see arrangements attributed to floral *artists*.) The aim of ikebana is conveyed in its name 生け花 *ikebana* which can be translated as 'flowers kept alive'. The first character is the same one you see in the word 生きる *ikiru* to live. Another word for flower arranging is 華道 *kadō* meaning 'the way of flowers'. Ikebana is said to bring people and nature together.



Cosseted flowers: a winter peony protected from frosts

Early on branches of evergreen plants were used to welcome the gods. With the arrival of Buddhism in the sixth century, flowers came to be used as

offerings in temples. The first standing flower arrangements came from this tradition. During the Heian Period (794-1185), the appreciation of flowers was strong among aristocratic families, particularly as a way to mark the passing of the seasons. Flower arranging is thought to have really come into its own with the development in the mid-1500s of the *zashiki*, the room for receiving guests. It became the custom to display a beautiful artwork and a flower arrangement on a display stand. Today's *tokonoma* alcove serves the same purpose.

Today there are different schools of ikebana. The earliest is Ikenobō, one of the three largest schools, the others being Sōgetsu and Ohara. There are many more however, with over 2,000 schools registered with the Ministry of Education. Ikebana now has followers around the world. In Sydney there

is one of the oldest overseas chapters of Ikebana International.

It is safe to say that flowers are much



more a part of the Japanese environment than here in Australia. Designs and motifs using flowers are used more widely in Japan than here in Australia. It's not just traditional items such as kimonos that are adorned with flowers; stationery, plates and bowls often use flowers as part of their design.

Perhaps one of the more unusual examples to Australian eyes would be a large single cherry blossom adorning a metal manhole cover as seen in the picture above of a Tokyo street. You really can display flowers anywhere in Japan!

Ikebana International has a very good online overview of the development of ikebana, the different schools, techniques and flowers. The website has the wonderful line: *In the past, IKEBANA was considered an appropriate pastime for even the toughest samurai.* www.ikebanahq.org



The Consul-General of Japan in Sydney at a commemorative event held by the Sydney chapter of Ikenobō in April this year

Ikenobō, the oldest school of ikebana, is celebrating 550 years of recorded history in 2012.

The first recorded mention of Ikenobō is a reference to people eagerly wanting to get a look at a floral arrangement by Senkei Ikenobō in the diary of a priest. Senkei was the first head of the Ikenobō school.

Ikenobō has its headquarters in Kyoto which is considered the birthplace of ikebana. There are now Ikenobō groups around the world including here in Sydney. The Ikenobo Sydney chapter held a special event in Sydney in April to mark the 550 year celebration.

You can find out more on **Ikenobō**, its history and practice at www.ikenobo.jp.