**Halifax Public Gardens Japanese Plantings & Connections Audio Transcript**

Welcome to the Japanese Plantings and Connections audio tour. This tour explores the trees, shrubs, and other plants of Japanese origin found within the southern half of the Halifax Public Gardens. Commentary regarding the connections between Halifax and Japan will also be shared.

This tour uses enhanced verbal descriptions and detailed directions guiding you from one location to the next to create a more accessible experience.

An accompanying brochure to this tour, which includes a map, can be obtained at The Friends of the Public Gardens’ visitor information desk found inside the Horticultural Hall on site. Additionally, a digital map of the tour can be downloaded from the “audio tours” section of our halifaxpublicgardens.ca website.

Our tour begins at the gate located at the southwest corner of the Gardens, near the intersection of Summer Street and Spring Garden Road. If you’ve not yet reached the entrance, simply pause the audio on your mobile device and resume playback when you are ready.

*[Four-second pause]*

**Halifax and Hakodate; a twin-city connection (**titles shown in blue are for reference only, not stated in audio**)**

We begin this tour with an acknowledgement that the Halifax Public Gardens is in K'jipuktuk, in Mi’kma’ki, the ancestral territory of the Mi’kmaq people. Originally a large, forested area with sprawling freshwater wetlands, the area from downtown Halifax to Point Pleasant Park was a gathering place for the Mi’kmaq prior to the establishment of the fortified settlement of Halifax in 1749 by the British. The land on which the Halifax Public Gardens stands formed part of the Halifax Common until the Gardens were founded in 1836 by the Nova Scotia Horticultural Society. It is now the oldest Victorian Garden in North America, and was designated a National Historic Site in 1984.

After entering the gate, follow the path for 19 metres, or 62 feet until the path splits. Here you’ll find a stone-mounted plaque surrounded by a vibrant Japanese azalea exceeding 2 metres, or six feet in height.

*[Two-second pause]*

Before you is a plaque commemorating the Twin Cities friendship between the cities of Halifax, Nova Scotia, and Hakodate, located on Hokkaido, the northernmost major island of Japan.

Interestingly, the description of Hakodate as ‘An historic port city host to a number of universities and colleges, as well as a fishing industry, with a star-shaped fortress overlooking a harbour and scenic boardwalk’ would also serve as a near perfect description of Halifax. These northern port cities share similar climates and soil compositions. Both cities possess famous gardens; the Hakodate City Tropical Botanical Garden, which draws monkeys to its hot springs every winter, and here the Halifax Public Gardens.

The twin cities connection came to be thanks to an agreement signed in 1982, by then Halifax Mayor Ron Wallace with Hakodate Mayor Yasushi Yano. Since 1982, every mayor of Halifax, and since 1996 every mayor of the now combined cities of Halifax, Dartmouth, and Bedford, has visited Hakodate at least once during their service, gaining insights about the culture and amenities, and observing the city’s operations.

Various initiatives over the years have strengthened the on-going relationship, the most enduring being the Halifax-Hakodate Friendship Society, which has existed since 1988. In addition, both cities have hosted exchange students; marathon runners from Nova Scotia have participated in races throughout Japan; and gifts of Japanese plants have been received by the Public Gardens from Hakodate over the years. In 1987, Hakodate engineers came to Halifax to measure and draft plans for a 14-foot, fully functioning replica of Halifax’s Old Town clock - which exists today in Hakodate.

Many Haligonians know of the tradition of Halifax gifting Boston a Christmas tree annually; given as thanks for Boston’s aid after the tragic 1917 Halifax Explosion. Few know that Hakodate also receives an annual gift of a large tree! Since the 1990’s, Halifax has sent a giant balsam fir tree on a 10,000-kilometre, 45 day-long journey by truck, train and ship to Hakodate. Once there, the tree, festooned with 50,000 lights, floats on a barge in the harbour, forming the centrepiece for the very popular nightly tree lighting ceremonies during Hakodate’s annual “Christmas Fantasy Festival.”

*[Two-second pause]*

**Hakodate Plaque Area Plants**

Now that you know some of the connections between Hakodate, Japan and Halifax, let’s admire the beautiful trees and other plantings of Japanese origin found within this very scenic half of the Gardens.

In addition to the azalea which surrounds the plaque with a profuse array of red blossoms in the spring, there are several additional Japanese plantings found in this peaceful corner of the Gardens.

Take the path forking to the left side of the plaque, and travel 6 metres, or 20 feet. On the left side of the path, you will find a circular bed containing Japanese angelica, along with hostas and lilacs. Japanese angelica is the multi-stemmed plant with prickly bark, displaying cream-coloured blossom clusters in summer, and purplish-black fruit that appears in the late summer and ripens by the fall, a favourite of birds. Often appearing thin and shrub-like, by maturity, Japanese angelica can reach about 12 metres, or about 40 feet in height. In Japan, during the spring, the new shoots of Japanese angelica are picked from the end of the branches, fried in tempura batter and eaten.

There’s a second circular bed with another grouping a further 18 metres, or 60 feet, further along, on the left-hand side of the pathway if you would like to see more examples of Japanese angelica.

Now retrace your route back to the twin city plaque, and as you do so, note the many dark-green, coniferous yews that fill the garden bed that contains the plaque. We will discuss this plant later in the tour.

*[Two-second pause]*

**When facing the plaque, take the path to your right for 15 metres, or 50 feet, until you reach a 3-way fork of paths. Take the middle path straight ahead of you, travelling towards the Horticultural Hall.  Continue for 13 metres, or 43 feet, until you reach the first of two trees that we will investigate along the way: an Amur cork tree located on the left side of the path and identified by a small sign at its base.**

*[Two-second pause]*

This tree has a short trunk with upward-spreading branches that produce a beautiful, wide canopy. Both the bark and branches of the Amur cork tree possess a spongy feel. The bark is also the major source for a fundamental herb used in traditional Chinese medicine. The tree is named for its origins in the Amur River valley, which runs along the border between southern Russia and northern China - although it’s also found in nearby Japan.

**Now continue 14 metres or 46 feet further along the path, until you reach a stand of Sawara false cypress just past a bench on the right side.  There is a small sign to help you locate them.**

*[Two-second pause]*

Native to the Japanese islands of Honshu and Kyushu, these conifers are members of the cypress family. The title of “false” cypress is a result of the historical mislabelling of non-European cypress as a separate group.

The Sawara is notable for its graceful, slightly weeping and shaggy foliage. New, golden branches contrast with dark-green, older foliage, and its drooping and scaly nature gives it visual interest. Sawara timber is used in religious and regal structures such as palaces and temples, as well as in coffins. Other examples of Sawara cypress can be found around the Public Gardens; notably in stands to the southeast and southwest of Horticultural Hall, and are otherwise often found near other Japanese plantings.

**From the Sawara false cypress, continue along the path for 45 metres, or 150 feet. The path you are following will gradually curve to the right and will pass a small pond on the right, where there are more Japanese plantings. Surrounding the benches in the seating beside the pond are Japanese hostas and a Japanese rhododendron.  Continue along this path past the pond until you reach the intersection of several pathways.**

*[Two-second pause]*

**When you reach the intersection, take the path second on the left, of the four paths in front of you. Travel 25 metres, or 85 feet and stop as you reach the end of the gravel path and the beginning of the stone circular walkway of a plaza with a small fountain in its centre. This is the general area we will be exploring for our next group of plants.**

**As you go, please note the brilliant blue hydrangeas along the foundation of Horticultural Hall on your left before you reach the stone plaza. These beautiful showy plants, also Japanese in origin, are found all around Horticultural Hall, particularly on the bandstand side. These hydrangeas are known by their common name, the ‘Tea of Heaven’ hydrangea, and as the common name suggests, are used to create a popular tea in Japan.**

**Please pause the audio until you reach the plaza.**

*[Two-second pause]*

**Horticultural Hall Area plantings**

We have arrived at Juan Plaza and Horticultural Hall. A white cottage with wooden siding built in 1847, Horticultural Hall is the oldest structure in the Gardens. Adjacent to the Hall, on its southern side, Juan Plaza is a small, stone-paved plaza designed around a fountain.

Juan Plaza was built in 2004 to commemorate the repair and revitalization efforts that followed Hurricane Juan’s devastating impact on the Gardens in September 2003.  The high winds of Juan toppled eighty mature trees in the Gardens. The fallen trees damaged the iron fence surrounding the Gardens in several places, uprooted paths, electrical wiring, and piping for irrigation.  The Gardens were closed for 9 months as crews removed the fallen trees and made repairs.

The area around the historic Horticultural Hall and Juan Plaza is host to several unique Japanese plantings. The first is the full-moon maple overlooking the fountain plaza. Standing facing the gate on the far side of the plaza that opens onto Spring Garden Road, with Horticultural Hall at your back, the full-moon maple can be found in a bed just this side of the structure on your right-hand side – which is the women’s washroom. It overhangs into the plaza and is labelled at its base. Hostas and rhododendrons can also be found in the same bed.

The full-moon maple is best identified by its beautiful, many-lobed leaves. The leaves are a rich chartreuse with pointed tips. The full-moon maple is slow-growing, reaching just 2½ metres, or around 8 feet, in 10 years. Like the Japanese maple with which it’s sometimes confused, the full-moon maple is referred to as a “large shrub” or “small tree.” It is native to the islands of Honshu, Shikoku, and Kyushu in Japan.

The next plant of note is the Kousa dogwood. A 3-metre, or 10-foot-tall specimen is located just to the right of the steps to the southern door of Horticultural Hall. Its beauty is further complimented by an azalea nestled beside it.

The Kousa dogwood is prized for its intricate beauty, and it’s an attraction throughout the year. Spring sees bright, star-shaped blooms; summer hosts bright red berries; the fall leaves are spectacular in colour and lastly, winter exposes the exfoliating, jigsaw-like bark. The berries are a favourite of birds, and Kousas are known for attracting songbirds.

The typically white or pink, star-shaped blooms, which are often what attract the attention of passers-by, are structures called “bracts.” The actual flower is the small green sphere at the centre of the bract, which then matures into a fleshy, seedy berry.

The last planting featured in this area is the Japanese umbrella pine.  To find it, face Horticultural Hall, turn to the right, and then travel 12 metres or 40 feet. You’ll pass the southeast corner of Horticultural Hall and cross a gravel path to a roughly triangular bed of trees. At the tip of this bed, 9 metres or 30 feet to your left in the direction of the Bandstand, is the Japanese umbrella pine. Accompanying it in the bed are various hostas and false cypress. Look for a sign that may be hidden by shrubs near the base of the tree.

The stunning Japanese umbrella pine is a living fossil. It has appeared in the fossil record for 230 million years and is the last of its family. It is distinct with its thick, waxy needles and slightly weeping appearance. The Japanese umbrella pine is rare and expensive as it grows extremely slowly and can take a century to reach maturity. It is called “Koyamaki” in Japan, and it is one of Japan’s five sacred trees. At Mount Kiso in Japan, Koyamaki branches are laid on the graves of loved ones to help lead them back to the land of the living. There is an additional, much smaller umbrella pine located in the bed found on the opposite side of Horticultural Hall.

**From the tip of the bed with the Japanese umbrella pine, head straight north, towards the Bandstand, for approximately 27 metres, or 90 feet, past an octagonal-shaped flower bed on your right-hand side, and take the next right turn - marked by a Norway maple with burgundy red leaves.**

As you travel towards the Norway maple, let’s briefly delve into why many Japanese plantings, such as Japanese dogwoods, rhododendrons and azaleas, are common in yards and landscapes around Halifax and the province of Nova Scotia. Their beauty, though certainly one element, is not the only factor in their popularity.

The first of the other reasons is the soil. Both Japan and Nova Scotia are largely composed of “podzol” type soil that is acidic in its composition, and commonly found in temperate and boreal zones of the northern hemisphere. The second reason is climate. Though Japan possesses areas with tropical temperatures in its southern reaches, and conversely Canada has an increasingly colder temperature range as you travel north, there is an overlap of similar climates in the region of northern Japan, namely Hokkaido, and in southern of Canada - in this instance Nova Scotia.

**Pause the audio now until you reach the right turn after the Norway maple.**

*[Two-second pause]*

**Now head down the right-hand path, leaving the Norway Maple on your right, for 45 metres, or 150 feet, to find the Katsura tree, our next featured plant, which you will find in a triangular patch of lawn on the left side. The Katsura is across from the clearly labelled Ruby Red Horse Chestnut tree.**

While you move to the next stop, some comments on the Victorian Gardenesque style of the Halifax Public Gardens in comparison to Zen-style gardening common in Japan.  Although these gardening styles come from very separate histories and regions of the world, they share several similarities both visually, and in their values.

Both Victorian Gardenesque style and Japanese concepts around gardening have a strong emphasis on the garden as a place for meditation, as well as a recognition of the effect that nature has on one’s morals and spirituality. Both share a desire to exert control over nature, while still celebrating its beauty. An example can be found in the Japanese practice of Bonsai, where manipulation and control over nature is maximised, as well as in the Gardenesque concept of the ‘specimen’ plant, often highlighting an exotic species, or a common species manipulated by grafting. On the other hand, the starkest difference between the gardening styles is the minimalist nature of a typical Japanese garden in contrast to the ornate Victorian Gardenesque landscape.

**If you have yet not reached the Katsura tree, please pause the audio.**

*[Two-second pause]*

**Plantings of the Katsura Tree Area**

The Katsura tree, a native to Japan and China, features many twisting trunks spreading out from its base.  It has heart-shaped leaves that are burgundy in the spring, blue-green in the summer, and which produce a spectacular apricot-coloured display in the fall, when they give off a scent akin to caramel or cotton candy.  The Katsura tree originates some 1.8 million years ago based on fossil records. During the Pleistocene epoch it grew across North America and Europe, however eventually being wiped out on those continents during the Ice Age.

Other Katsura trees and weeping Katsura trees of varying sizes can be found in the northern half of the Gardens. In 2019, one of the beautiful Katsura trees near the Victoria Jubilee Fountain in the Public Gardens was designated a wish tree, in the spirit of the Japanese festival of Tanabata.

The annual Tanabata Festival occurs on the 7th day of the 7th month and it celebrates an ancient legend that reached Japan around the year 700 AD. The legend revolves around a forbidden love between Orihime, daughter of Tentei - God of the heavens - and Hikoboshi, a cow herder in the heavens. The Tanabata Festival emphasises the wish of the lovers to be together.

In Japan, participants in Tanabata record their wishes, as well as names, on a slip of paper - a tanzaku - and attach it to a single tree chosen as a “wish tree.” Methods of attaching wishes vary regionally, ranging from tying the tanzaku onto the tree, to attaching it to a citrus fruit and tossing it into the branches.

In the Public Gardens version of Tanabata, participants submitted their wishes to the tree, virtually.  This was part of the summer-long ’Text-a-Tree’ event in 2019 that enabled people to send messages to 15 different trees in the Gardens. Over the summer, 10,000 messages were received and responded to by volunteers designated to speak for each of the trees!

**Continue straight along the path you’ve been following for another 18 metres, or 60 feet, where you will find a Japanese tree lilac on the right side of the path. On the way you’ll pass the decorative vegetable bed just off the path also on the right.**

*[Two-second pause]*

The Japanese tree lilac has a unique, twisting trunk. An obvious difference between a Japanese tree lilac and other lilacs is that it is larger than the more common shrub-like lilac species, growing up to 9 metres, or about 30 feet in height, and 6 metres, or just under 20 feet wide. A more subtle difference is its scent. The tree lilac has a more overly-sweet aroma coming from its small clusters of creamy-white flowers than other lilacs. The Japanese tree lilac is native to northern Japan; often found growing on cliffs and among scrub brush.

This Japanese tree lilac was one of the 15 trees that could be texted during the summer of 2019 Text-a-Tree event. The 15 trees were given nicknames for the event, and this tree was named Maiko, to honour its Japanese roots, pun intended. It was one of the more popular trees that visitors texted.

*[Two-second pause]*

**From the Japanese tree lilac retrace your steps, returning towards the Katsura tree, but for just 11 metres or 35 feet, until you reach the first path branching to the right.**

**Take the right path for 30 metres, or 95 feet, heading north. On your right you will pass by a stand of Sawara trees and then some rose beds.**

**Upon reaching the intersection with a wide pathway known as the Petite Allée, turn right. Head straight towards the bridge ahead for 22 metres, or 70 feet, stopping when you reach the decorative lamp post on the right side of path.**

**Pause the audio now until you reach the lamp post.**

*[Two-second pause]*

**Fitzgerald’s Bridge Walkway Plantings**

Take a moment to enjoy the truly beautiful vista spread out around Fitzgerald’s Bridge. The vibrant reds of the Japanese maples are complimented by the many textures and shades of green from the surrounding pines, tamaracks, hemlocks, false cypress trees and rhododendron shrubs, all looking lush in contrast to the starkness of the desert bed on the left. This setting provides one of the most popular backdrops for the many wedding and graduation photographs taken in the Gardens.

Many trees of Japanese origin help to create this wonderful view. Let's first take in the Japanese Kwanzan flowering cherry tree immediately to your right. This small tree is particularly notable in the spring when its stunning display of double-flowering pink blossoms compliments the brilliant pink rhododendron blooms in the area. The flowers of the flowering cherry appear before copper-coloured leaves unfold in late spring. The leaves mature to create a dark green, thick canopy in the summer and change to beautiful colours of orange and bronze in the fall.

Now move 8 metres, or 25 feet ahead towards the bridge and take in the beautiful golden thread-leaf false cypress, a shrub with lacy, mounding branches, on the left-hand side of the path just before the bridge, adjacent to the desert bed.

Continue 6 metres or 20 feet to the centre of the bridge. From here you can see a variety of Japanese maples along the waterway.  The red leaves of two specimens of the small Japanese red maple tree variety called Bloodgood can be seen: one upstream to the left of the bridge, on the right bank, and the other a few feet beyond the bridge on the right-hand side of the path. The delicate, shrub-like, green-leafed Japanese maple variety called “Green Mist” is present upstream of the bridge on the left bank across from the red Japanese maple. Looking downstream, the elegant, mounding red “Waterfall” Japanese maple can be found, which is shrub-like with fine leaves. We will see this tree again as we move towards the Main Gates. The Japanese maple comes in hundreds of varieties, with many shapes and sizes, different leaf shapes, and colours, ranging from green, orange, red and purple to variegated or multicoloured.

**After crossing the bridge, continue 13 metres or 45 feet, and then turn right at the Bloodgood variety of Japanese maple tree.  Take the path that follows the brook towards the main gates of the Public Gardens. After 18 metres, or 60 feet, just beside the lamp post, you’ll have a better view of the mounding red “Waterfall” Japanese maple beside it.**

The flower bed on the right side containing the Waterfall Japanese maple also includes hostas and the early spring-blooming bleeding hearts; these are identified by delicate flowers and burgundy-red leaves. Beautiful yellow-green Japanese Hakone grasses can be found along the path as well.

On the left-hand side of the path, Japanese plantings between the bridges include additional Sawara false cypress, Kousa dogwoods, and a Japanese tree lilac.

**Continue towards the Main Gates for another 60 metres, or 190 feet, stopping about 7 metres, or 25 feet, before the Main Gates.**

While admiring the plantings along this dual-bridged waterway, we will again consider the comparisons between the Gardenesque landscape design of the Halifax Public Gardens and Japanese gardening methods.

Visually, the two gardening approaches share many similarities. Plants, particularly shrubs and trees, are treated like ‘living sculptures.’ Neatness, symmetry, and careful maintenance are key to both. Rockeries are often featured, and water in the form of streams and pools is typically present, with bridges as a common adornment. Statues, sculptures, and other ornamentation are also frequently found. Finally, the Victorian Gardenesque style valued exotic plant material, and Japanese plants were much sought-after additions, and so many Victorian and Japanese gardens have plants in common.

**Please pause the audio until you are 7 metres in front of the Main Gates.**

*[Two-second pause]*

**As you face the Main Gates, in the bed on your right-hand side, and at the point closest to the gate, you will find a large shrub with waxy leaves. The leaves are distinct, as they have light-coloured, fuzzy, satin-like undersides. This is a Japanese rhododendron. The best way to identify this plant is by touch, as there are other types of rhododendrons nearby which do not have leaves with the same textured undersides.**

**Pause the audio now until you find the Japanese rhododendron.**

*[Two-second pause]*

**Plantings Near the Main Gates**

This beautiful Japanese rhododendron is the cultivar “Rhododendron yakushimanum”. As mentioned, these Japanese rhododendrons are distinguishable from other rhododendrons by the cream-coloured, satin-like “fuzzy” backing of their leaves, as well as their smaller, upturned appearance. Japanese rhododendrons do best in partial shade, planted in acidic soil, such as that of Nova Scotia and Japan, and in a cool and moist location. When comparing their blooms to those of the closely related Japanese azaleas, the rhododendrons possess more trumpet-shaped blossoms of a larger size, compared to the smaller, but still showy star-shaped blooms of the azalea.

Two other unique yakushimanum cultivars can be found on the other side of this same garden bed, along the path to the right of the gate. These are Rhododendron yakushimanum varieties ‘firestorm’ and ‘crete.’ To find them, continue about 11 metres or 35 feet around the tip of this bed – they’ll be on your right-hand side. Again, the easiest way to identify them is by touch, to find the fuzzy undersides of the leaves.

About 3 metres or 10 feet beyond the ‘firestorm’ and ‘crete’ cultivars, on the same side of the bed is the 15-foot-tall Japanese yew - the final planting of our tour. There is a small plaque at the base of this tree, but the sign may be obscured by bushes or shrubs.

Though it is a tree, this cold-hardy evergreen often has a shrub-like appearance and grows very slowly. This means if you find a large specimen such as this, it is likely quite old. Yews are best identified by their rich, dark-green needles, and their bright-red berries, or “arils”, which are adapted cones. Within its native range, some individual yews are known to live up to 1000 years. Almost every part of the Japanese yew contains toxins that can be harmful to mammals, including humans. Oddly, Whitetail deer are immune, and actually like the taste of the foliage.

*[Two-second pause]*

Thank you for taking this audio tour. We hope you’ve enjoyed perusing a selection of the Japanese plantings of the Halifax Public Gardens, as well as hearing some of the history between Halifax and Hakodate.

We hope that the next time you visit the Gardens you will take in its features with a new perspective, and that you may feel a deeper connection with this historical Victorian green jewel of Halifax.

Please visit our website halifaxpublicgardens.ca for more audio tours on the Halifax Public Gardens and the adjacent historic Camp Hill Cemetery.