



TOICHI DOMOTO, NURSERYMAN

Over sixty years experience with flowers

Wm. E. Schmidt, Portola Valley, California

For as far back as he can recall, to earliest childhood, Toichi Domoto was among flowers. Ornamental plants literally have been his whole life and he intends to enjoy their company for many years to come when his plans for retirement are resolved — soon, he hopes.

Toichi was virtually born among flowers on December 11, 1902, in his parents' home at the Domoto Bros. Nursery. As he grew up in the nursery, he often went along on horse-drawn delivery wagons, a small boy sitting proudly "up front." Later he made a number of day-long trips from the nursery in Fitchburg (now 78th Avenue and Olive Street, Oakland) to delivery points in San Francisco, as far as Castro Street or out to Fillmore

Street. The two-horse express wagon would leave the nursery in the dark early morning hours, get on a ferry for San Francisco, make the deliveries and usually get back in the middle or late afternoon.

This early association with plants actually links the horse-and-buggy days of the nursery business in this area to the present, or so-called jet age. As Toichi comments: "For me that's all there was to do. When I was small, I played in the Domoto Bros. Nursery. As I grew up, I worked in the nursery. Later I started my own nursery."

How did the Domoto Bros. Nursery, where Toichi learned how to grow plants, get its own start? What was it like through the years of transitions? For that we'll have to go back to June

10, 1867, or perhaps it was 1866, when Toichi's father, Kanetaro Domoto, was born in Wakayama Ken in Japan. Dates of those early years are not known exactly, for many records have been lost.

When he was only sixteen years old, Kanetaro and a brother came to the United States, arriving in Seattle. Next year, 1883, finds him in San Francisco. With little knowledge of English and in need of a job, he began as a kitchen helper at the Palace Hotel. Sometime later he worked in the gardens of the Adolph Sutro estate, now Sutro Heights Park, overlooking Seal Rocks and the beach in San Francisco.

About this time he entered his first business venture by importing a quantity of Unshiu or Satsuma oranges from Japan (no import restrictions in those years!). The novel fruits reached San Francisco in good condition and sold well. But a second and bigger repeat shipment arrived totally rotted and he "lost his shirt," as he recalled later.

Undaunted, he and another brother, Motonoshin, started a small nursery in Oakland, about where Third and Grove Streets are now. This was a success and in a few years, in the late 1880's, they bought four acres of land on Central Avenue and East 14th Street in East Oakland. This is now 55th Avenue and East 14th Street, in the Melrose district of Oakland. Subsequently, in the 1890's, they added four more acres to the property.

Here the two brothers soon established a range of greenhouses and lath-houses. Their main business was the growing of chrysanthemums and carnations in the greenhouses for cut flowers. They also raised some seasonal flowering plants in pots.

By 1890 they were importing plants from Japan that were shipped during the dormant season. They also brought in Australian specialties, imported forcing azaleas from Belgium and bulbs from Holland for forcing in pots

or as cut flowers. Among their earliest importations of camellias from Japan was *Camellia japonica* 'Usu-Otome,' which Toichi's father renamed 'Pink Perfection.'

By this time the brothers had acquired new first names and were known far and wide in the trade as Tom (or Thomas K.) for Kanetaro Domoto, and Henry for his brother Motonoshin Domoto. They also more or less divided the responsibilities of the thriving nursery. Henry managed the cut flowers and the selling end, while Tom took on the growing of ornamental shrubs, trees and pot plants such as coleus, pelargoniums, holiday peppers, poinsettias and Easter lilies.

For this article Toichi loaned me his much-used copy of the forty page *Descriptive Catalogue of Japanese Plants and Shrubs*, issued by the "Domoto Bros., Proprietors" in 1892. It has no illustrations and some of the botanical names are, of course, different from those we have for the same plants today. The catalogue is fascinating, not only for the curious spelling and terms, but particularly for the great variety of ornamental plants listed. A surprising number of them are considered "new" in 1969!

The inside cover is devoted to "How to Reach Our Nursery." It describes in detail how to get to the Domoto Bros. Nursery in East Oakland from any direction by such means as "Broad or Narrow Gauge" (Oakland and S.F. R.R.) ferry, "Hayward electric car," "Oakland and Berkeley electric car" and even "Overland train."

The "General List of Plants" almost at once starts out with a most remarkable offer of *Acer palmatum*: "Acer Polyporphum — Japanese Maple. 35 varieties." This is followed by a listing of various sizes and prices, from 35¢ to 75¢ each. (These are all retail prices). The offer continues: "4 or 6 kinds grafted on one stalk each 50¢; per dozen \$4.50; per 100 \$35. Two stalks growing together and twisted, grafted from 5 to 7 kinds on stalk,

each 75¢; per dozen \$6.00; 10 to 12 different kinds on stalk, \$1.25 to \$1.50."

Reading on, to azaleas in many varieties, *Camellia japonica* in four colors and *C. sasanqua*, five varieties; we notice "*Cedrela Chinensis*," two species of shrub clerodendrums, corylopsis, and we come to *Cryptomeria japonica*. This is followed by a listing of eight named varieties, such as "Cryptomeria Yenko — Cord-like foliage, weeping nature. Height 1 to 1½ feet, each 35¢; per dozen \$2.75." Other cryptomerias have foliage described as: "Silver white foliage;" "Twined cock and comb shapes, very curious;" "Chain like, drooping;" and "Slender growth, in shape like peacock tail." Prices from 25¢ to \$1.25 each. Less by the dozen.

Four fuchsia varieties are named: E. G. Hill, Storm King, Phenomenal and "Sun Ray — A beautiful red variegated foliage and red single flowers; and many more varieties. Each 15¢; per dozen \$1.50."

Among numerous other plants there follow eight different magnolias; a white-berried *Nandina domestica*; many colors in tree peonies; flowering peaches and flowering apricots, with double and single flowers and in white, pink, red and variegated, respectively.

Fifteen species and varieties of "Climbing Plants" include four wisterias, one of which is "Two kinds on the stalk, blue and white; each \$1.00 to \$1.25."

The selection of over fifty species and varieties of ferns includes seven species of tree ferns, the latter from \$3.50 to \$7.50 each for established plants. There are seventeen species of palms; thirty-four varieties of *Pelargonium domesticum*, listing at least seven names known in the trade of today.

Among roses offered and described are twenty-five "Hybrid Perpetual Roses," including "General Jacqueminot, 25¢" and "Paul Neyron, 15¢ to 25¢;" seventeen "Climbing and Noi-

sette Roses" include "Marechal Neil, 20¢ to 30¢" and "Lady Banksia, 15¢ to 20¢;" forty-nine "Everblooming Tea and Hybrid" include "La France, 15¢ to 25¢" and "Papa Gontier, 25¢ to 35¢" and thirty "Bourbon Roses" including "Rainbow (California New Rose) — . . . color bright pink, striped and splashed with brilliant crimson in handsome way, 25¢ to 35¢."

Chrysanthemum plants were their great specialty. Twelve pages name and describe over two hundred varieties of all types, shapes and colors, including "Grand Japanese and California Varieties Introduced in 1892," at 30¢ each and "Choice Eastern Varieties, Introduced in 1892," at 25¢ each. General collection varieties are priced at 10¢, 15¢ and 20¢ each.

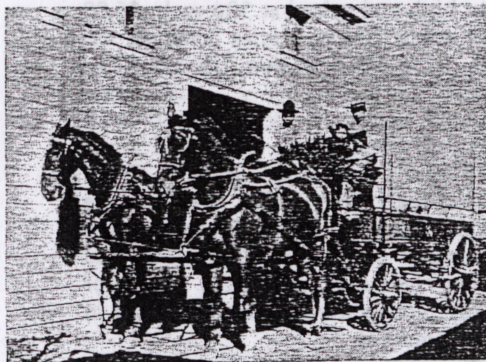
The last three pages are devoted to "Japanese Fruit Trees" and include nut trees. "Persimmon (or Japanese Date Plum)" is described in detail and priced: "3 to 4 feet high; per dozen \$1.50; per 100 \$8.00." Plums "3 feet high; per dozen \$2.00; per 100 \$12.00." A "Mammoth Chestnut," also a "Japan Walnut," the latter at 40¢ each, per dozen \$4.00. Among others are a "Japan Quince" and "Loquat Japonica;" eight kinds of citrus, described in detail, with average size three feet high and priced at 50¢ each; \$5.00 per dozen. Three berries conclude the list, including the new raspberry-like "Japan Wineberry — . . . rich wine-colored berries thickly covered with purplish hairs; flavor sweet and juicy; 25¢ each, \$2.50 per dozen." Toichi states that from 1890 to 1910 the Domoto Bros. Nursery imported many thousands of fruit trees, nut trees and citrus trees each year from Japan, of many more varieties than are listed in this catalogue.

Especially notable is the extensive collection of variegated plants offered in this catalogue of 1892. There are at least thirty-six kinds and, beside familiar ones, such unusual plants as "Gardenia Pleno — Variegated foliage with

yellow"; "Ginkgo Variegata — Variegated with yellow and white, a rare variety," *Podocarpus macrophylla* 'Variegata,' *Ternstroemia japonica* 'Variegata,' *Kadsura japonica* 'Variegata,' *Sciadopitys verticillata* 'Variegata' and "Rhapis Flabelliformis Variegata — Very rare variety."

A final note of special interest is that, even as early as 1892, the Domoto brothers were also importing large specimen plants. An example in this catalogue is *Cycas revoluta*, of which they list small plants from 25¢ to medium ones for \$3.00 each, but also offer: "Height 6 to 7 feet, 34 to 37 inches circumference, \$50 to \$65, according to size or weight."

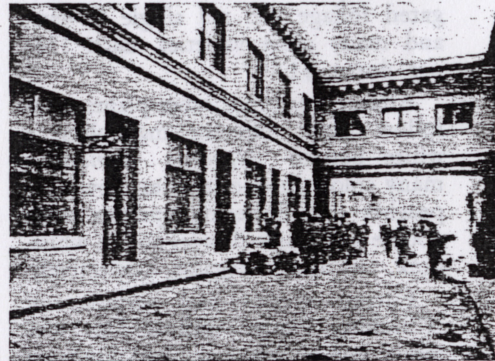
Tom Domoto made a trip to Japan and was married there on June 29, 1899. He brought his bride to East Oakland and established a home on the nursery grounds. There Toichi was born in 1902, and eventually was joined by two brothers and eight sisters.



Before the 1906 earthquake, this wagon was the market place for many flower growers in the Bay Area, hauling the Domoto Brothers' flowers to San Francisco.

During those years the Domoto brothers were leaders in the cut flower and potted plant business, as attested by two old photographs reproduced for this article. The two photos and the legends are by courtesy of the Magazine of the California State Florist's Association.

About this time the area surrounding the nursery property started to build up with homes and so on November 11, 1902, a month before Toichi was born, the brothers bought forty-eight acres in the Fitchburg district of Oakland, where 78th Avenue and Olive Street meet now. They called this place the "New Ranch." Here they put up twenty-five greenhouses, each 28 feet by 200 feet and raised cut roses and carnations in them. The final move from the nursery on 55th Avenue to the "New Ranch" was made in 1910, when Toichi was eight years old.



Lick Place: The growers of Japanese descent rented space at 31 Lick Place for a market. In the beginning, the Domoto brothers, whose store occupied the corner, subsidized the rent for the growers when the going was rough.

Toichi remembers that during those years the Domoto Bros. Nursery received, via railroad from New York, boxcar loads of English laurels, Grecian laurels or bay trees and boxwoods imported from Holland. These were four to seven feet tall, all trained in pyramids, globes, standards (tree form) and other shapes (including what the trade now calls "poodles"). Each one was grown and shipped in a fancy, painted wooden planter box. "They were the devil to unload from the box cars," he recalls.

Importations of new plants continued and in 1913 they brought in from Japan plants of a double-flowered

Hydrangea macrophylla (*H. otakusa*). Tom Domoto named this form 'Domotoi' and when the brothers exhibited an outdoor bed of it at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in 1915, *H. macrophylla* 'Domotoi' was awarded a gold medal.

Their heavy imports in 1913 and 1914, particularly of plants to be used at the 1915 Exposition, proved to be the last of their kind. First, World War I was the main deterrent, but the clincher proved to be Nursery Stock Plant and Seed Quarantine 37. This law was promulgated shortly after and under the authority of the Plant Quarantine Act of 1912 and stopped all unlimited importations.

Thereafter the Domoto Bros. Nursery imported only limited numbers of camellias, azaleas, chamaecyparis and other materials for propagation. From Japan they continued to bring in quantities of Easter lily bulbs, of a *Lilium giganteum* strain, for forcing. These were shipped in wooden boxes holding from one hundred to three hundred bulbs, depending on bulb size, and were tightly packed in yellow clay. Eventually *L. giganteum* strains replaced *L. candidum* as the forced Easter lily.

Another gold medal exhibit at the Exposition in San Francisco in 1915 was the collection of Kurume azaleas sent by the Japanese nurseryman, Kojiro Akashi. There were thirty plants in a dozen varieties and after the Exposition the Domoto brothers bought some of them. In 1916, they imported their first Kurume azaleas. In 1917, Tom Domoto went to Japan and obtained exclusive sales rights for Kurume azaleas in the United States from the association of growers of these azaleas in Kurume, prefecture of Fukuoka. During the next four years Domoto Bros. Nursery brought in well over ten thousand Kurume azaleas and introduced twenty-five varieties including such well known ones as Pink Pearl, Coral Bells and Cherry Blossom.

In 1917, the year Toichi graduated from Lockwood Grammar School in East Oakland, the nursery bought its first truck, a 1½-ton Denby, with flat, solid-rubber tires. They turned in six horses as down payment! That year the Domoto Bros. Nursery officially became Domoto Bros., Inc., in order to live with the anti-alien Land Law restrictions.

Toichi Domoto graduated in 1921 from the Fremont High School in the Melrose district of Oakland. He went to Stanford University from 1921 to 1923 and graduated in floriculture from the University of Illinois in February, 1926.

Following graduation he continued to work for Domoto Bros., Inc. and in 1927 bought twenty-six acres of land in Hayward, where his nursery is still located today. The same year he built the first lathhouse there.

Now he worked only part-time at Domoto Bros., Inc., in order to have time to start his own nursery. At first he raised mostly camellias and some daphnes, azaleas and tree peonies. He marketed the plants for the next three years through Domoto Bros., Inc. In 1929, Toichi imported named varieties of tree peonies from Japan and France.

For some years now, Domoto Bros., Inc. had been under the pressures of urbanization and was forced to sell part of the nursery property. That and the deep depression following the crash of 1929 contributed to the closing of Domoto Bros., Inc. in 1930.

Toichi Domoto was entirely on his own now and began to sell the plants he raised directly to home gardeners and to nurseries. He branched into specimen plants and in the course of years developed a noted selection of them. That year he sold his first lathhouse-grown camellia cut flowers.

In 1931 he imported named varieties of flowering quince (*Chaenomeles speciosa*) from Japan. His goal in crossing them was to get lower growing plants with flowers that were

more double; he also worked for more colors in the contorta form of the flowering quince. In two or three years he had several thousand seedlings started that would bloom in a few more years. Toichi says that, in retrospect, he was not successful in reaching his breeding goals with the flowering quinces.

During 1936 he imported scions of *Camellia reticulata* 'Captain Rawes' from Hillier & Sons, Winchester, England. Almost all died when grafted by the methods he used, so he next imported grafted plants from Hilliers. These were 12 feet to 18 feet high, grafted in various ways, including whip and side grafts. Toichi says that the idea of cleft grafts on heavy understock of camellias, now used so much in California, came from the southern states in the 1940's. In 1936, Toichi named and introduced *Camellia japonica* 'Cho-Cho-San' to the trade.

Also in 1936 he imported all the varieties of yellow tree peony hybrids available from Lemoine in France. The best three of these have been quite popular, especially with flower arrangers. That year and through 1938 he imported a few each of many varieties of *Camellia japonica* and *Camellia sasanqua* from Japan.

The tree peonies he imported from Japan and France in 1929 were well established by now and in 1936 and 1937 he collected and planted quantities of the seeds in open seedbeds. They took up to two years to germinate and stayed another year in the seedbeds. They were planted out in 1939 and 1940, mostly by machine, in long rows in the open field — as there were about 50,000 of them.

It was also in 1940 that he brought in a large collection of named Higo iris from Mr. Wada, a specialist in Japan. The new plants of this improved strain of Japanese iris (*Iris kaempferi*) were also planted out in the fields. During this year and in

1941 he also imported plants of double-flowered gerberas from India and got seeds of the doubles from German, Japanese and southern California specialists. All the resulting seedlings were planted out in spring 1942, next to the plants from India.

By far the biggest event for Toichi Domoto in 1940 was his marriage on August 31 to Alice Okamoto, who was born in Oregon and grew up in Los Angeles. They have one daughter, who is married and lives in Seattle, and one son who is graduating in medicine from Yale this year.

All was going well for Toichi. He was already widely known as a specialist in camellias and his nursery featured the best and the latest varieties of camellias, azaleas, rhododendrons, deciduous magnolias, choice conifers and bonsai plants. The flowering quince seedlings from the crosses he had made in the middle 1930's had been coming into bloom for several years and now he selected two, a double red and a double white one, for propagation and introduction. During that year of 1941 he also planted his first greenhouse with big camellia plants for cut flower production (corsage flowers).

Then came Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941, and with it great hardship for those of Japanese descent on the Pacific coast. All were evacuated to inland camps in the spring of 1942. Toichi spent the first year in the Merced, California, Assembly Center and in the Amache Relocation Center in Granada, Colorado. Because of his reputation as a camellia specialist, he got a job in 1943 with Schramm's Greenhouses, Crystal Lake, Illinois, where roses, gardenias and camellias were grown under glass for cut flowers. He stayed with Schramm's until the end of the war.

Within one month, in 1943, Tom Domoto died in Granada, Colorado (in October) and Henry Domoto died in Minneapolis (in November).

During the war years Toichi's nur-

sery was taken care of by an employee, Peter Milan, who managed it until Toichi's return. Even though Peter worked full time, with his wife helping, and though he hired extra help off-and-on, he could barely keep the many acres of field-grown stock weeded and watered. Some plants were lost, such as most of the double gerberas and the Higo irises. "I was lucky," Toichi says in all sincerity, "Peter Milan is an honest and wonderful fellow and had my nursery in good shape when I got back."

Toichi returned to his nursery in the spring of 1946. Some of the fifty thousand tree peony seedlings he had planted out in 1939 and 1940 began to bloom that spring. A few stragglers made it in 1947. From this huge population of seedlings Toichi selected the very finest as stockplants for vegetative propagation. That, however, turned out to be a difficult problem and still has not been resolved.

In June, 1946, plant patents No. 700 and No. 701 were granted for the flowering quinces 'Double Red' and 'Double White' that he had selected in 1941 from his thousands of seedlings.

Toichi concentrated on building up his stock with the latest varieties in his major specialties, camellias and azaleas. The great spring feature at the nursery for years have been the tree peonies in bloom. His wide selection of specimen trees and shrubs, especially in varieties not usually available, was further expanded. Also more bonsai plants were acquired.

The years 1945 to 1948 saw the greatest demand for cut camellia flowers used by florists for corsage work. By now Toichi had an excellent crop of them each season in three greenhouses, together covering twenty thousand square feet. He shipped them as "tailored" flowers (each flower was prepared with a collar of fresh camellia leaves, ready to wear), mostly to Chicago. Demand for camellia cut

flowers has declined since the late 1940's and is quite low now, Toichi says.

He had been watching a fimbriated sport of *Camellia japonica* 'Mathotiana' for some years and finally decided to introduce it. He named it 'Flowerwood' and in 1951 was granted plant patent No. 1074 for it. Two years later, in 1953, Toichi named and introduced his most famous camellia, 'Shiro Chan,' a near-white sport of 'C. M. Wilson.' In 1959 he named and introduced the fine, large, white variety, 'Ecclefield,' a seedling of *C. japonica* raised by Mrs. Ecclefield of Livingston, California.

In recent years Toichi has gradually limited his retail trade by not advertising and now concentrates on wholesale sales of his plants. He keeps up on the latest in the nursery industry and has held active memberships in professional and horticultural organizations; he has held office in some of them.

Toichi is successfully keeping his hand in the work of selecting and hybridizing. He has again worked up a good block of the double-flowered gerberas and is not only propagating the finest by division, but also by seeds for more and clearer colors.

He grows some camellia seedlings and is now trying to get true miniatures — plants of small stature, with small leaves and small flowers.

His big interest now is the hybridizing and selecting of naturally trailing azaleas, and they look promising. Originally, in the early 1930's he gathered seeds from a plant of *Rhododendron indicum* 'Daikagura.' This plant is better known as *Azalea macrantha* 'Daikagura' (Mme. Butterfly), with rather small single flowers, white, deepening to orangy-salmon at petal edges. Some years later he selected from the resulting seedlings one of trailing habit, but with lavender-purple flowers. This one he crossed with

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other varieties and from those seedlings got two natural trailers. One is a deep salmon pink and the other a single white.

This year (1969) the latest generation of these trailing azalea crosses came into bloom. From the six hundred seedlings, Toichi picked out several plants with the best natural trailing habit and with colors of flowers he can introduce or use for further improvements.

When he finally retires from the nursery business, Toichi Domoto will still have plants to work with, for he admits that he already has a few choice selections of camellias, azaleas, tree peonies, flowering quinces and others "stashed away around my house." "Also a few old bonsai plants," he says, "that I'm keeping for their artistic form or for sentimental reasons" — to keep him company, for many years to come.

Toichi concentrated on building up his stock with the latest varieties in his major specialties: camellias and azaleas. The great spring feature at the nursery for years have been the tree peonies in bloom. His wide selection of specimen trees and shrubs, especially in varieties not usually available, was further expanded. Also more bonsai plants were acquired.

The years 1965 to 1968 saw the greatest demand for cut camellia flowers used by florists for corsage work. By now Toichi had an excellent crop of them each season in three greenhouses, together covering twenty thousand square feet. He shipped them as "forced" flowers (each flower was prepared with a collar of fresh camellia leaves, ready to wear), mostly to Chicago. Demand for camellia cut

flowers has declined since the late 1940's and is quite low now, Toichi says. He had been waiting a long time for a chance to expand his business.

Some plants were lost such as most of the double "Hime" and "Hime" plants. Toichi lost many of his old plants when he moved to his new home in 1965. He had been waiting a long time for a chance to expand his business.

Toichi is successfully keeping his head in the work of selecting and breeding. He has again worked up a good block of the double white camellias and is now only propagating the best by division, but also by seeds for more and clearer color. He grows some camellia seedlings and is now trying to get true miniatures — plants of small stature, with small leaves and small flowers.

His big interest now is the hybridizing and selecting of naturally trailing azaleas, and they look promising. Originally in the early 1950's he had seed from a plant of "Rosa-azalea" from Indiana. This plant is better known as "Rosa-azalea" (Mme. Butterfly), with rather small single flowers, white, depending to orange-salmon at petal edges. Some years later he selected from the resulting seedlings one of trailing habit but with lavender-purple flowers. This one he crossed with

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