

## THE JAPANESE FLORAL CALENDAR.

### II. THE PLUM.

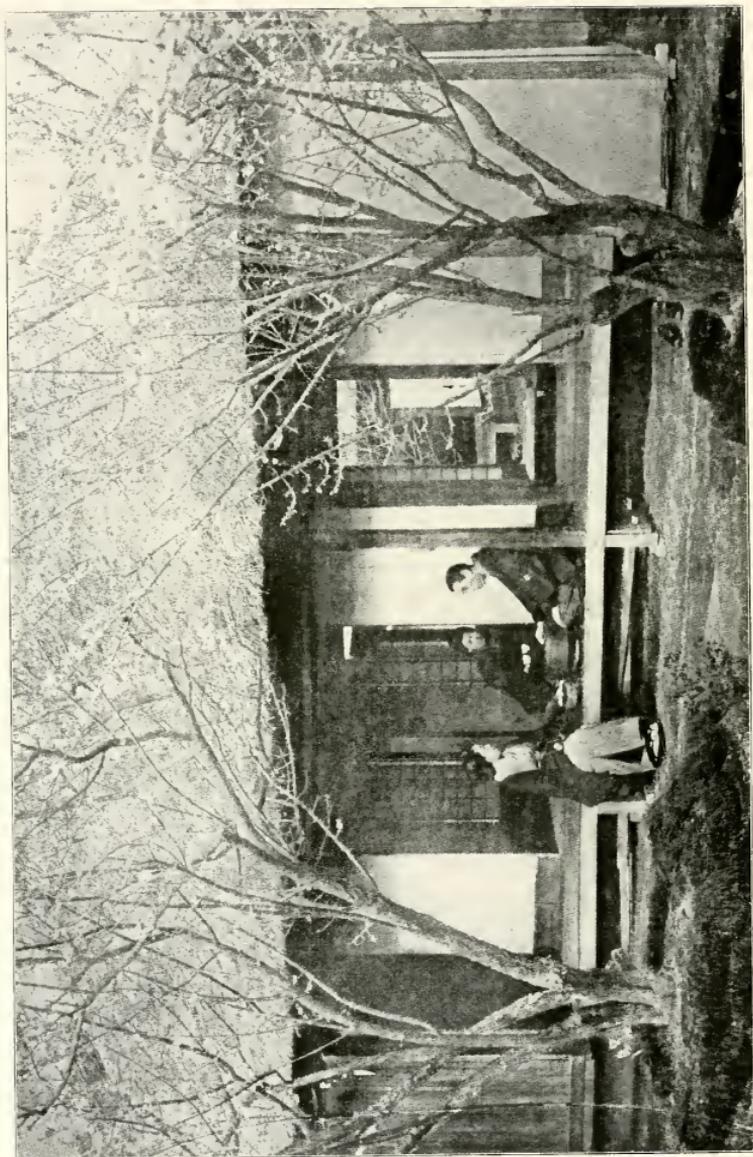
ERNEST W. CLEMENT, M. A.

THE plum-blossom has already been mentioned in connection with the pine and the bamboo for New Year's decorations, but it deserves a month by itself. As it begins to blossom, in some parts of the country, in January, and often continues in bloom till March, it might represent any one of the first three months. But, as most of February generally comes in the first month of the old calendar, it is doubly appropriate for the plum. This blossom is emblematic of perseverance, because it sometimes forces its way out through the snow with which its branches are laden. This is illustrated in the following poems, the first from Huish's *Japan and Its Art*, and two from Piggott's *Garden of Japan*:

"Ice-flakes are falling fast  
Through the chilly air, and now  
Yonder trees with snow bloom laden  
Do assume the wild plum's guise,  
With their mass of snowy flowers  
Gladdening winter's dreary time."

"Amid the branches of the silv'ry bowers  
The Nightingale doth sing; perchance he knows  
That Spring hath come, and takes the later snows  
For the white petals of the Plum's sweet flowers."  
(From Chamberlain's *Classical Poetry of Japanesc.*)

"The flowers of the plum-trees  
All through the day make snow-light,  
Moonlight through the night.  
Like the icy spray which the breeze  
Scatters from the stream,  
Like the snow-flakes' flight,  
Falling petals seem."



THE SUGITA PLUM-GARDEN.

Probably one element of the popularity of the plum is to be found in the fact that it is the first blossom to appear after *kan*, the period of severest cold, and is, therefore, a harbinger of spring. And, as the plum is the earliest of blossoms, it is called "the eldest brother of the hundred flowers," "the eldest flowers of mother earth," and "the first of flowers."

The plum is symbolic of womanly virtue and sweetness; and "O Ume San" is a favorite name for girls. This blossom is "often drawn athwart the moon"; and it is commonly associated with the nightingale (*uguisu*), which "hides and sings among the flowers." This association, not merely in art but also in literature, is illustrated both in the second poem quoted above and in the following (Piggott's):

"Home friends change and change,  
Years pass quickly by,  
Scent of our ancient plum-tree,  
Thou dost never die.

"Home friends are forgotten ;  
Plum-tree blossoms fair,  
Petals falling to the breeze,  
Leave their fragrance there.

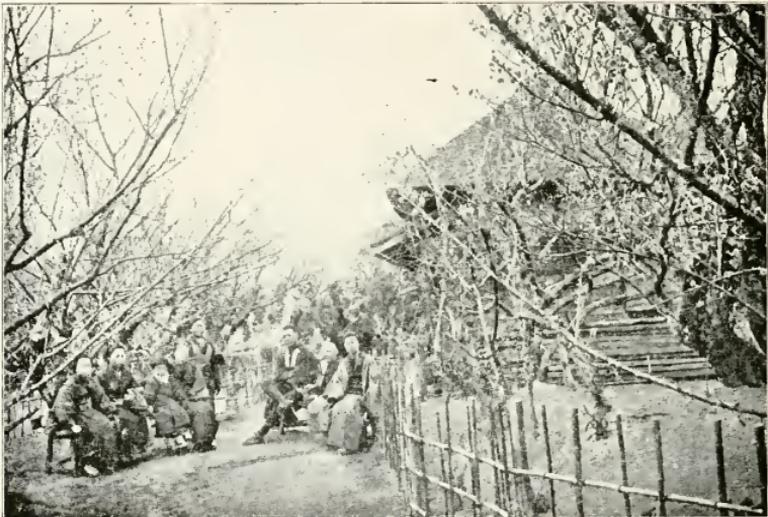
"Cettria's<sup>1</sup> fancy too  
Finds his cap of flowers,  
Seeks his peaceful hiding-place  
In the plum's sweet bowers.

"Though the snow-flakes hide  
And thy blossoms kill,  
He will sing, and I shall find  
Fragrant incense still."

The most famous places for plum-trees are Kameido, near Tokyo; Sugita, near Yokohama; and Tsukigase, about twenty-five miles from Nara. The Ume-Yashiki, or Plum Mansion, at Kameido, is famous for its *Gwaryobai*, literally "Recumbent Dragon Plums," over five hundred in all and very old; the large original tree is said to have resembled a dragon lying upon the ground. Tsukigase is renowned for the plum-trees which line the bank of the Kizu River for more than two miles. It is said that "no other place in Japan can boast such a show of the pink and white flowers of this fragrant tree." The Tokiwa Park of Mito is famous for its large grove of plum-trees, originally one thousand in number, planted in 1837 by the old Prince Reikko.

<sup>1</sup> The *uguisu* is known in science as *cettria cantans*.

There are said to be sixty different species of plum-trees in Japan. To go and see that blossom is a most delightful pastime and holiday. "Often one sees visionary old men sitting lost in reverie, and murmuring to themselves of *ume-no-hana*, the plum-blossom. They sip tea, they rap out the ashes from tiny pipes, and slipping a writing-case from the girdle, unroll a scroll of paper, and indite an ode or sonnet. Then with radiant face and cheerful muttering, the ancient poet will slip his toes into his clogs, and tie the little slip to the branches of the most charming tree."<sup>1</sup> According to a Japanese poem, "the sight of the plum-blossom causes the ink to flow in the writing-room."



A VIEW IN THE RECUMBENT-DRAGON-PLUM GARDEN.

So prevalent is flower-viewing in Japan, that Prof. Chamberlain tells of a party of "380 blind shampooers who went out to see the plum-blossoms at Sugita," and were made safe by a long rope which held them together!

The following is a free translation<sup>2</sup> of another plum-poem:

"In spring-time, on a cloudless night,  
When moonbeams throw their silver pall  
O'er wooded landscape, veiling all  
In one soft cloud of misty white,  
'Twere vain, almost, to hope to trace  
The plum trees in their lovely bloom

<sup>1</sup> Scidmore's *Jinrikisha Days in Japan*.

<sup>2</sup> Conder's *Flowers of Japan*.

Of argent ; 'tis their sweet perfume  
Alone which leads me to their place."

There is also an interesting story<sup>1</sup> related by Mr. Conder in



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explanation of the name "Nightingale-dwelling-plum-tree," applied even till the present day to a favorite species of delicious odor,

<sup>1</sup> Conder's *Flowers of Japan*.

having pink double blossoms. Sometime in the tenth century, the Imperial plum-tree withered, and, as it was necessary to replace it, search was made for a specimen worthy of so high an honor. Such a tree was found in the garden of the daughter of a talented poet, named Kino Tsurayuki, and was demanded by the officials of the Court. Not daring to resist the Imperial command, but full of grief at parting with her favorite plum-tree, the young poetess attached to its trunk a strip of paper, upon which she wrote the following verse<sup>1</sup>:

" Claimed for our Sovereign's use,  
 Blossoms I've loved so long,  
 Can I in duty fail?  
 But for the nightingale  
 Seeking her home of song,  
 How shall I find excuse? "

This caught the eye of the Emperor, who, touched by the plaintive sentiment expressed, inquired from whose garden the tree was taken, and ordered it to be returned.

Here is still another little plum-poem :

" How shall I find my ume tree?  
 The moon and the snow are white as she,  
 By the fragrance blown on the evening air,  
 Shalt thou find her there. "

<sup>1</sup> Brinkley's translation.