

Behind the Business: Sakata

| Chris Beytes

>> Published Date: 8/27/2012



GrowerTalks, October 1939 Our first trip out of the city was to visit the town of Chigasaki, about half an hour from Yokohama. Here are located the plant breeding grounds of T. Sakata & Company, well-known thru [sic] originating a number of florists' specialties, the best known being All-Double petunias. Widely travelled and using excellent English, the dominating genius here, Mr. Sakata, is a quiet, modest fellow with a keen sense of practical and scientific plant breeding that our trade has good reason to appreciate. Our business owes much to those who work hard and patiently to improve our stock, and let us hope the future will work out a plan that will repay them with greater protection and recognition. This encouragement would pay our business to do so.

pictured: George J. Ball visits Sakata in 1939. The original caption didn't indicate which, if any, of these gentlemen was Mr. Sakata.

At least, it is the growers' business to keep wide awake to what they are accomplishing. Sometimes we are not. Mr. Sakata made his original effort to interest our trade in his strains of double petunias in 1930. He tried, thru [sic] costly efforts, for three years to convince the American trade of the reality of these strains. He was told they were not possible. It seems rather inconsistent that the European trade should have been first to recognize their value. And this in the face of the fact that we are supposed to be so keenly interested in something new and better. ... When it goes beyond a certain point, conservatism works the wrong way. Today, the All-Double petunias are an indispensable item and the business in them seems to increase annually.

Mr. Sakata's career furnishes the usual and some exceptional examples of a background that most growers can appreciate. He started out in 1909 with the advantages of a Tokyo Agricultural College education, followed by an apprenticeship largely with nursery firms in many foreign lands. [Editor's note: including the U.S. in 1921]. The year 1913 finds him back in Japan feeling his way into export business, but this was discouraged by the outbreak of the World War*. From this period begins his interest in flower seeds, particularly the breeding of improved strains—his all-absorbing enthusiasm. He was getting nicely started when the devastating earthquake of 1924 destroyed nearly all of the 6 million population city of Tokyo and Yokohama and from which Mr. Sakata barely escaped with his life. "Not a single paper or plant was saved from the great fire that followed."

But in characteristic Japanese fashion, he slowly got back on his feet, and the great cities of Tokyo and Yokohama so terribly razed, promptly rose from their ashes. Today it is difficult, in walking about these cities, to realize such a disaster could have occurred, and but 15 years back.

Mr. Sakata was at least left the garden of his home, and it was here during the reconstruction period that he worked out his principles of plant breeding that resulted in the All-Double strains of petunias. When we recall the 10% -15% double strains of the past, we become appreciative of the value of this Japanese work, and the end is not yet. Fortunately, for his ability to keep going, these strains are recognized and accepted everywhere, and he is abundantly able to carry on.—*George J. Ball*

**Note that he didn't call it World War I. That's because World War II hadn't yet happened. In less than two years, Takao Sakata would have a new challenge to add to his list.*