

Glowing Ginkgos

Peter Del Tredici, Senior Research Scientist

Senior Research Scientist Peter Del Tredici has been studying and writing about Ginkgo biloba for more than thirty years. Here, he provides a candid account of attending a festival in celebration of the plant in Tokyo, Japan on December 2, 2012. The Arboretum celebrates its own collection of ginkgos with Ginkgo Fest on April 20. See the listings on page 12 for details.

Around three in the afternoon, I took the Ginza subway line to the Gaemmae stop, where a ginkgo festival was supposed to be happening. Emerging from the station, I walked in the direction that most people seemed to be headed. After fifty meters or so, I spotted the tall yellow spires of some ginkgo trees in the distance and before long I found myself on Icho Namiki, a five-hundred-meter long street lined on either side with a double row of large ginkgo trees planted in 1923. Wide sidewalks passed between each of the double rows and they were crowded with people admiring the glowing yellow leaves on the perfectly pruned, conical trees. While I had seen pictures of this famous street, experiencing the quadruple row of trees in person took my breath away—the ginkgos were in perfect color, glowing in the afternoon light. I couldn't stop taking pictures of them nor could most of the people who were there with me.

I can't really do justice in writing to the scene that surrounded me: crowds of people promenading along a carpet of fallen yellow leaves under a canopy of golden foliage, all surrounded by a clear blue sky. While adults were trying to capture the scene with a cell phone or camera, children were collecting and throwing handfuls of leaves like snowballs. Young and old alike were blissfully bathing in the radiance of the trees, absorbing their beauty and energy.

At the far end of the alleé, near the Meiji Memorial Picture Gallery, there were numerous vendors selling an incredible array of Japanese fast foods. To my disappointment, however, there was only one vendor selling anything related to ginkgo, a carpenter with cutting boards made from ginkgo wood (which has no resin and is easy to clean). While the carpenter spoke only Japanese, his daughter spoke enough English to allow us to have a conversation about how much we both loved ginkgo trees (and, of course, I bought a couple of cutting boards). The only frustration of the afternoon happened when I tried to buy an official ginkgo shirt off the back of one of the volunteers who was directing traffic. He



Crowds admire the brilliant yellow autumn foliage of *Ginkgo biloba* trees lining Icho Namiki ("Ginkgo Avenue"), located in the Meiji Jingu Shrine outer garden. The trees have been pruned into tight spires.

would have none of it, even after I pulled out my wallet and offered him as much money as he wanted. Finally around five o'clock, with the sun setting and my spirit soaring, I made my way back to the subway station.

Around nine the next morning, I returned to Icho Namiki to photograph the trees in a different light and found a much calmer scene. There were many fewer people around and the road was closed to traffic for a series of children's road races which were just getting started. A unique photographic opportunity presented itself as hoards of kids raced along the street through the canopy of golden ginkgos with parents cheering them on. I couldn't get over the fact that I had found this magical place by virtue of a remarkable set of coincidences: first, that I was in Japan in early December; second, that I only learned about the festival from a casual conversation the day before; and third, that I managed to navigate the Tokyo subway system on my own. Clearly it was meant to be. ∞