

ATSUMORISO - *CYPRIPEDIUM HOTEI ATSUMORIANUM*

Atsumoriso (*Cypripedium macranthos* var. *speciosum*) is an orchid that bears reddish purple flowers during the rainy season. The blooms resemble a croissant with a ribbon tied around it.

Called the “king of wild orchids,” Atsumoriso is adored by flower lovers. But it has long been feared that it may die out. In particular, a variety called Kamanashi Hotei Atsumoriso (*Cypripedium hotei atsumorianum*) has become so scarce that it has gained the moniker “phantom flower.”

This variety grows naturally on Mount Kamanashi in Shinshu (the old name of Nagano Prefecture) and is characterized by its roundish flowers.

The town of Fujimi in Nagano Prefecture has been putting a great deal of effort into protecting and cultivating Atsumoriso.

Clusters of Atsumoriso used to be found widely on Kamanashi and neighboring Mount Nyukasa. But the numbers declined sharply due to illegal collection, animal damage and changes in the environment caused by afforestation.

Eleven years ago, local residents and town government officials set up a group dedicated to repopulating the endangered species. They started by trying to find areas where the plant grows naturally.

They discovered four Atsumoriso roots after clambering up cliffs and going deep into the mountains.

“Our tenacious efforts paid off,” said Hiroshi Nakayama, 77, head of the group. “When we found them, my heart was filled with emotion, and I thought we had to protect them at any cost.” The group’s members installed nets to keep wild animals at bay and set up cameras to deter people from illegally digging up the plant. These efforts have led to a 10-fold increase in the number of Atsumoriso growing in the wild. But it was much more difficult to propagate the plant through cross-fertilization and cultivation.

The group, with the help of companies and high schools, carried out a number of experiments for artificial reproduction. But barely one in a thousand seedlings they planted grew to flower. It proved to be much tougher than imagined.

The name Atsumoriso comes from warlord Taira no Atsumori (1169-1184), who was killed by enemy warrior Kumagai Naozane in the Battle of Ichinotani during a conflict between the Heike (Taira) and Minamoto families.

The plant was so named apparently because the glamorous flower was reminiscent of the armor that Atsumori wore.

Atsumori became a symbol of the tragic saga of the downfall of the Heike family, which was once in power and reveled in prosperity, but the orchid named after him is now being brought back from the brink of extinction.

The noble and elegant flower appears to be a crystallization of the indomitable spirit of the local people who have worked so hard to preserve its beauty.



THE ASAHI SHIMBUN

