

supermarket, shipped in from outside. I had grown my own water spinach for as long as I can remember, but when I tried some from the supermarket, it didn't taste anything like what I was used to. It had no fragrance at all. The green onions should have had a lot more zing, too. Back in the day, we even ate banana root and the cores of papaya trees. Maybe that's because it was a time of food shortages, but those hardships don't change the fact that people used to know a lot more about the things growing around them that could be foraged for food."

Then tragedy struck. Her oldest daughter, Kiwa, was killed in a traffic accident while in the 11th grade. Having lost her daughter, who was just starting to come into her own in life, it was as if time had stopped for Takenishi. She kept working, harder than ever, but try as she might, she could not get motivated for anything, and she didn't feel like talking to anyone. Ultimately, it was herbs that pulled her out of the darkness that seemed to have no exit.

She found a small, handmade book her daughter had put together, and approached a publisher about turning it into a real book. Through a bit of a mix-up, an editor happened to see a diary Takenishi had been keeping, written in the form of letters to her lost daughter, and urged her to publish it. Once that was printed, he said he would like her to write a series of illustrated essays on the herbs she so frequently mentioned in the letters to her daughter.

"I often touched on herbs in my letters because that was one of the things we talked about when we did things together like baking a cake or whatever. At first I told the editor there was no way I could do the illustrations and turned him down, but he said, 'Just try drawing something once, it doesn't matter what,' so I did. When I showed him what I had done, he

Top right: Pages from Takenishi's growing collection of pressed-leaf specimens, each accompanied by handwritten botanical notes. Center and below: Herbs and edible flowers harvested from Takenishi's gardens.



immediately said, 'Oh, wow, these are spectacular!' and buttered me up so much that I had to accept."

That was how she began writing a regular column for a local magazine. Her husband dabbled in painting, so she asked him to teach her the basics of perspective and such, and she set about developing her skills. She even sought out the tutelage of a professional artist, but she soon realized she wasn't really interested in learning how to make "paintings," per se. She just wanted to draw plants, so she enrolled in a correspondence course focused specifically on botanical illustration instead. But when she did what the text told her to do, the resulting pictures always felt wrong to her somehow, and she gave up pretty quickly.

Without necessarily realizing it, Takenishi carries a very specific image of each plant in her mind. It comes from having been in constant, close contact with plants in her daily life. That's the difference between a person who merely looks at plants in order to paint them and someone who has communed with them, body and soul.

"As a child, when I noticed how *seiron benkeiso*—also known as *Kalanchoe pinnata*, or 'miracle leaf' in English—sprouts new plants from its leaves, I remember referring to the little plantlets using *iru*, the Japanese verb 'to be' for animate things, including humans. Even today, I still have a habit of addressing plants in essentially the same way I talk to people." The extremely close relationship Takenishi enjoys with plants is palpable in the true-to-life detail of her herb portraits.

Three years ago, Takenishi suffered a second loss, when her husband died suddenly of a stroke. The man who started her on the ABCs of painting did not originally share her interest in plants, but a plant had played a key role in bringing them together. The first time they met, he brought her