

# The “Tree Climbing” Pioneer in Japan

Born in the United States and raised in Canada, John Gathright introduced the recreational activity of Tree Climbing® to Japan about twenty years ago. The activity, which incorporates the ancient Japanese view of nature, is now well established and expanding beyond Japan’s shores.

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According to the NPO Tree Climbing® Japan<sup>i</sup>, Tree Climbing® (hereinafter “tree climbing”) is the practice of climbing trees using special ropes, saddles and safety gear to experience a sense of unity with trees, forests and nature. While originally it was a technique used by tree specialists known as arborists for pruning tall trees without harming them, tree climbing gained popularity as a recreational activity in the United States in the 1980s.

John Gathright established Tree Climbing® Japan in Seto City, Aichi Prefecture in 2000 to introduce tree climbing to Japan and continues to be the country’s leading expert in the field and promotes it by such means as training over 6,000 qualified persons.

Raised on Vancouver Island in Canada, Gathright’s interest in Japan was sparked in his childhood when he found what appeared to be a wooden tool washed up on the shore that turned out to be a *geta* (traditional wooden Japanese sandal). That spark kindled a desire to go to Japan one day, a desire that was fulfilled when

John Gathright at the top of an ancient giant sequoia tree



he began an undergraduate course at a Japanese university in 1985. It was then that he encountered the culture of wood once again. This time, it was a bento lunch box that captured his imagination.

“In Japan, the leaves of trees are used to impart fragrance to food and preserve it. If you think about it, lunch boxes and chopsticks are made of wood. I realized that trees are truly at the heart of Japanese people’s lives,” says Gathright.

After graduating from university, Gathright began writing about and promoting nature and the environment, in particular the forest culture of Japan. He started tree climbing when he was contacted by a woman with paraplegia in Japan who said she would like to climb the giant sequoia tree in California that Gathright had written about. Giant sequoias only grow in limited areas—about 1,000-2,600 meters above sea level in the Sierra Nevada in California—and are among the world’s tallest trees, reaching heights of up to a hundred meters.

Gathright set about organizing a team of experts in Japan, including a doctor, and in 2001, after three years preparing for the climb, the woman was able to leave her wheelchair and fulfil her dream, spending the night 80 meters up in the arms of the giant tree. According to Gathright, she was the first severely physically challenged person in the world ever to climb an ancient giant sequoia tree.

A few years later, Gathright created a nature experience program to enable visitors to EXPO 2005 AICHI, JAPAN to experience tree climbing firsthand.


In 2007, Gathright received a doctorate from Nagoya University for his research on tree climbing which found that the activity helps reduce stress and regulate the autonomic nervous system. In the same year, his tree climbing program, based on the concept of “Energizing people, energizing trees” (*Hito mo ki mo genki ni naru*) was awarded the first Kids Design Award<sup>ii</sup>, promoted by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI). Gathright’s program to familiarize people with the forest was praised as “impressive for its inclusion of rules for entering the forest and rigorous safety measures.”



Gathright leads a tree-climbing class for children in Japan

In 2013, he established the Arborist® Training Institute, which focuses on training professional arborists mostly in Japan but also overseas.

“I’m glad I was able to start a tree climbing activity in Japan, where people believe that each and every tree is inhabited by a deity. When we work overseas, we call out “*O-jama shimasu*” (a kind of apology for intruding) when entering the forest, and say “*Arigato*” (thank you) to the trees. When I explain that this custom is based on the traditional Japanese view of nature, they understand and join in with me,” Gathright says with a smile.

Tree climbing, introduced to Japan by Gathright, is now spreading among forest lovers around the world, incorporating the view of nature held by the Japanese since ancient times. 



Gathright’s tree-climbing programs are accessible to people of all physical abilities



The Arborist® Training Institute trains professional arborists in Japan and overseas

i. <https://www.treeclimbing.jp>

ii. Awarded for outstanding products, services, spaces, activities, and research that provide solutions for social issues related to children and child-rearing