

Cherry blossoms adorn Tokyo's Meguro River in spring, with about 800 cherry trees lining a 2.2km stretch.

TOKYO IN FLOWER

A popular destination with visitors for its ancient temples and shrines, world-class technology, and unique shopping districts, Tokyo is less well-known for its abundant nature. Cherry blossom season is celebrated but it's not the only time to see natural wonders – the nation's capital has seasonal highlights all through the year. From lush wisteria to irises, peonies and chrysanthemum, these markers of the seasons provide joy for locals and tourists alike and help shape the city's culture.

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Japan is a nation finely attuned to the landscape's annual transformations. Not only does the country wholeheartedly embrace the four distinct seasons of winter, spring, summer, and autumn, each bringing with it celebrations, traditions, fashion, festivals, food and foliage, but it also tracks 24 micro seasons.

Those micro seasons are then further divided into 72 'ko' around five-day-long micro-micro seasons deeply connected to and appreciative of the natural world, its bounty and beauty, of which the floral world plays a major role. In Japanese culture, flowers are more than just

"IN JAPAN, FLOWERS ARE MUSES, SYMBOLS AND A REASON TO CELEBRATE."

something beautiful to look at. They're artistic muses, spiritual symbols, celebratory events, visual representations of time and its passing, and a reason to celebrate. The existence of flowers and their seasonal appearances has fuelled human creativity and social

Apart from our list, tulips, sunflowers and hydrangeas are also popular in Tokyo.

interaction since the beginning of the nation and will continue to do so for lifetimes to come.

Tokyo's flower season unofficially starts with the arrival of cherry blossom in spring (March-April) and continues all the way until the next year. This floral calendar is by no means an exhaustive list, but it is a great place to start discovering the city's floral features. Shaping artforms from poetry (haiku), to theatre (noh and kabuki), to fashion (the kimono), and leisure (ikebana, or flower arranging, and hanami, cherry blossom viewing parties), to learn about Japan's love of flowers is to take a deep dive into the nation's rich culture.

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CHERRY BLOSSOM

LATE MARCH - APRIL
JAPANESE NAME: SAKURA

There's no more better way to start the flower calendar year than with the arrival of the nation's most globally famous flower, the cherry blossom. As the weather begins to turn from crisp, short winter days to longer, more leisurely spring ones, the warmer weather brings with it a sense of hope, anticipation, and fresh beginnings, all spurred on by the arrival of the soft pink sakura buds.

The evolution of cherry blossom buds is fascinating; they develop during the previous summer before entering a dormant state like hibernation in autumn and winter. The slow, constant exposure to the warmer spring days kicks the buds into gear, and once they do arrive – in late March/early April depending on the temperature – they last just two or so weeks before carpeting the ground in endless pink petals. But if you're lucky,

you'll be able to witness a crossover of blossom appearances, as Japan expert and Tokyo-based journalist Lisa Wallin explains. "One of the things I love about sakura is that there are so many varieties and they bloom at different times, so spring feels like it lasts a lot longer here."

Embedded with meaning, cherry blossoms play a key role in Japanese culture and philosophy.

Within their short lifespan, they represent rebirth, the impermanence of all things, and the appreciation of the beauty of nature.

Cherry blossom season is celebrated all throughout Japan. Hanami (flower-viewing) picnic parties pop up in parks across the country, while businesses – including the country's famous convenience stores – sell a seemingly endless array of cherry blossom themed snacks,

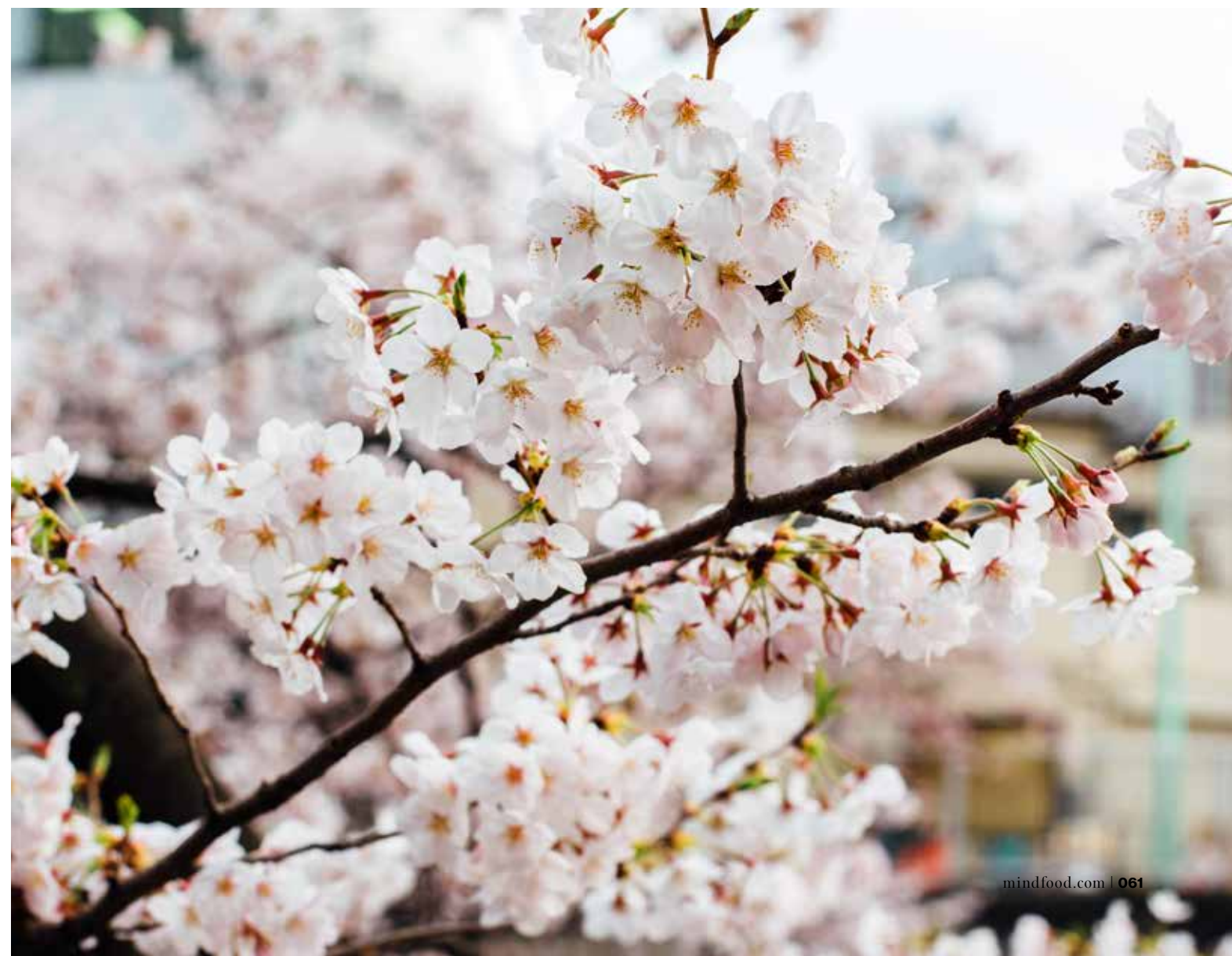
traditional foods like sakura mochi (a dessert), and even cherry blossom-decorated cans of beer.

Many of Tokyo's major parks host cherry blossom festivals and celebrations. Some of the biggest and most well known are Ueno Park's Sakura Matsuri and the Nakameguro Sakura Matsuri Festival, which runs along the Meguro River.

However, many other parks, like Harajuku's Yoyogi Park, Shinjuku Gyoen National Garden, and Kichijoji's Inokashira Park, are buzzing with picnic-goers jostling for prime position under the blossom-heavy branches.

No matter where you visit, Wallin explains, you'll be greeted with wonderful views. "Walking around residential neighbourhoods often rewards you with tiny pockets of daintily decorated trees in small parks or peeking over garden walls, and it's a lot less crowded than the typical cherry blossom viewing spots."

The arrival of cherry blossoms is a truly magical time in Japan.



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JAPANESE WISTERIA

LATE APRIL - EARLY MAY
JAPANESE NAME: FUJI

Hangings wisteria at the Kameido Tenjin Shrine. Japanese wisteria rivals the cherry blossom for the love the locals have for the flower when it is in bloom.

Once cherry blossom season has become just a memory, the arrival of late April means one thing for flower lovers; it's time for Japan's lush wisteria (known as 'fuji') to make their less hyped but equally impressive appearance. The flower's most recognisable form comes in shades of royal violet and delicate light lavender. Yet their colour spectrum ranges from these purples to pinks to whites and even bright, sunny yellows.

In Japanese culture, the wisteria holds significant meaning. Its purple shade is a symbol of royalty, which 1,400 years ago, was a colour worn

only by the Imperial family and high-level officials. 'Fuji Musume' (in English, Wisteria Maiden), the most famous dance in kabuki (a traditional Japanese theatre), is based on the wisteria blossoms and their role as a symbol of love and togetherness.

Horticulturalists love the elegantly drooping wisteria. Their long, lazy branches can easily be crafted into large, immersive flower displays, with gardens throughout the country drawing crowds of admirers wanting to wander through multi-coloured tunnels and experience flower viewing from a whole new perspective.

If your timing is right and the seasons favourable, Tokyo guests can experience both the cherry blossom and wisteria season in one visit.

Some of the best places to see the wisteria in full bloom in Tokyo are Hie-jinja Shrine in Akasaka, the Imperial Palace East Gardens and Kameido Tenjin Shrine in the Koto Ward, which hosts the annual Kameido Tenjin Wisteria Festival from mid-April until early May.

A day trip from Tokyo to Ashikaga Flower Park is well worth adding to the itinerary.

Here you'll be able to witness a staggeringly big, almost 2,000 square metre-large, 150-year-old wisteria tree that's so large and full of flowers that its canopy vines have to be held by steel supports.

“THE WISTERIA IS A
SYMBOL OF LUCK,
SUCCESS AND
LONGEVITY.”

燕子花

JAPANESE IRIS

MAY - EARLY JUNE
JAPANESE NAME:
KAKITSUBATA

While in English, the term iris is a widely used umbrella term for the iris flower, it's a different story in Japan. The admiration for the iris is so deeply ingrained, and the study of the iris so rich, you could write a novella on the names given to this beautiful, droopy-petalled flower.

Would an iris by any other name smell so sweet? Japanese iris as a term encompasses three key species of irises, both cultivated and wild; there's the hanashōbu (iris ensata), the ayame (iris sanguinea), and the kakitsubata (iris laevigata).

Each of the three iris varieties has a slightly different personality. The ayame is the wild one. It thrives in dry soil, flowering from early May to mid-June. The kakitsubata prefers wetter, more cultivated conditions and is in its prime in the second half of May. Finally, hanashōbu flowers last, in June, and like the kakitsubata, it loves moist soil and to be doted upon. This last species is the most well known of the three.

Of these three main types of Japanese iris, it's the kakitsubata ('rabbit-ear iris' in English) that seems to have captured the hearts of the nation's artists, playing the role of muse for poems, stories and paintings for centuries. Nezu Museum in Tokyo's elegant neighbourhood of Aoyama is where you can see the peak creative legacy of this revered flower.

A series of golden folding screens, 'Kakitsubata-zu' by Ogata Kōrin (1658-1716), is a national treasure and considered the world's most famous iris painting.

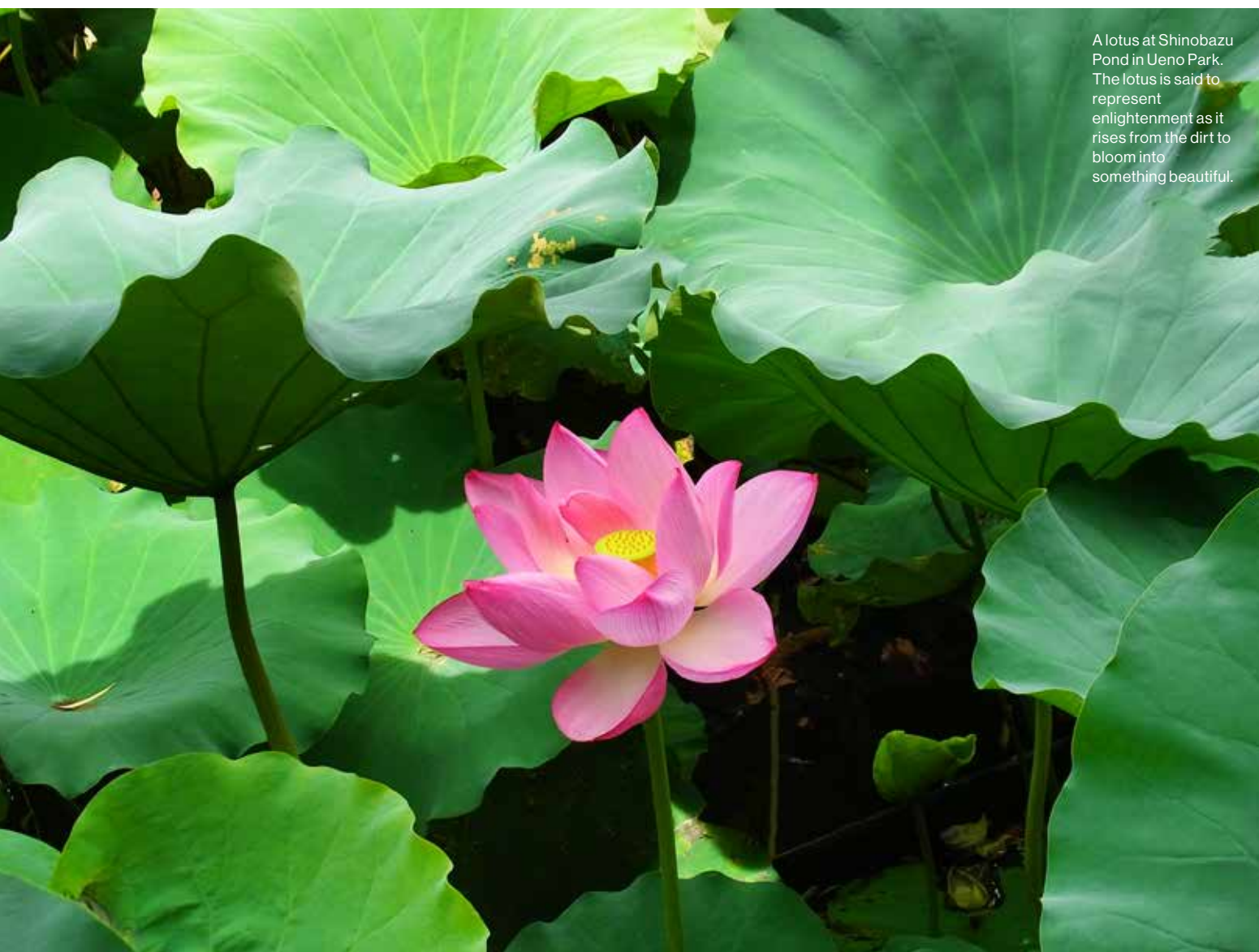
"In Japan, people have been composing waka poems and painting pictures of the four seasons since ancient times," says Nezu Museum's Kayoko Muraoka. Nezu Museum is an excellent place to see the artistic influence of the flower on Japanese

Iris garden in full bloom in Japan. Iris lovers flock to the Suigo Itako Iris Festival flower festival, which boasts over 1 million irises of 500 varieties, and attracts around 800,000 visitors annually.

culture. "Visitors can enjoy the artworks of the four seasons that our ancestors cherished, and in the garden, they can enjoy the scenery itself," says Muraoka.

"I hope that by enjoying the artworks in the exhibition room and the scenery itself in the garden, visitors will gain a deeper understanding of the aesthetic sense of Japanese culture and appreciate the artworks more deeply."





A lotus at Shinobazu Pond in Ueno Park. The lotus is said to represent enlightenment as it rises from the dirt to bloom into something beautiful.

蓮の花

LOTUS FLOWER

MID JULY - MID AUGUST
JAPANESE NAME: HASU NO HANA

Growing defiantly in dark muddy waters, though long hot conditions to open and show off its speculantly beautiful blossom if only for a few brief hours a day, the lotus is a symbol of endurance, enlightenment, purity, and the rewards that one can reap from overcoming hardship.

The flower's peak season is mid-July to mid-August, during some of the city's harshest summer months.

Often also a symbol of religious reincarnation, this water-dwelling flower, with its oversized leaves and pink, purple and white petals, is a commonly used Buddhist motif, which is why you'll often find them cultivated near spiritual locations such as temples and shrines. Dai Miyamoto, the founder of Japan

Localised, an organisation that runs tours throughout Japan, including a flagship tour that visits spacious Ueno Park, explains the seasonal ambience the lotus brings to the city: "Lotus flowers signify the sweltering summer of Tokyo."

The most iconic place to see lotus in the peak season is Ueno Park's Shinobazu Pond, which also has a

**"LOTUS FLOWERS
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SUMMER OF TOKYO."**

lotus observation deck. Here, the lotus flowers open in the early morning and close by around noon, "So they will motivate you to wake up early and visit the park to see the beautiful scenery," says Miyamoto. "I, like many locals, love to run around the pond in the early morning and start the day."

He brings his guests to this pond to help offer a deeper cultural context of the park's history: "This pond and the park that surrounds it are an important place to understand about the Tokugawa Shogunate era. They tried to build Ueno Park's features to look like Kyoto. During WWII, it was turned into a paddy field, but after they built the pond."

During the blossoming season, the surrounding area is home to the Ueno Summer Festival, a summer celebration with dance performances, markets and paper lantern floating events (known as toro nagashi) held on the lotus-filled pond.

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CHRYSANTHEMUM

SEPTEMBER - MID NOVEMBER
JAPANESE NAME: KIKU

If there was one 'king' of flowers in Japan, it would be the chrysanthemum. Blessing the nation with its arrival from September through November, the chrysanthemum, or kiku in Japanese, is not only visually striking – layer upon layer of long petals coming together to create a gorgeous soft ball of colour – but also a symbol of Japanese royalty and culture.

There are around 350 types of chrysanthemums in Japan alone. It was introduced to Japan by China.

So deeply loved by the nation, the flower was adopted by the Japanese royal family, who use the flower motif across all facets of royal life, from clothing to seals and even as

decoration for the throne. "The chrysanthemum is the symbol of Japan," explains Japanese journalist, culture and travel expert Mizuki Hamamoto. "It's also printed on the cover of our Japanese passports, government military seals and flags. If you have a document with kiku seal on it, or even visit a temple or shrine with the kiku crest, it means the highest echelon, the royals, approve it."

The royal chrysanthemum is yellow, but the flower comes in various forms and colours like red, pink, white and orange. White chrysanthemums indicate purity, grief, and truth and are used for funerals, while red

chrysanthemums symbolise love. While less seasonal than many of the country's other flowers – cherry blossom being an example – their arrival in autumn does have a spiritual connotation deeply connected to it.

"Kiku mostly blooms around the Autumnal Equinox Day, which in Buddhism it's believed is the time of year where the barrier between the physical world and spirit world is at its thinnest," says Hamamoto.

The best place to get a better idea of the sheer breadth and scale of chrysanthemum culture in Japan is to visit the Tokyo Metropolitan Tourism Chrysanthemum Exhibition in Hibiya Park in Chiyoda City, which typically runs in November.

Held since 1915, this part-floral-art-event part-festival hosts 1,000 exhibitions showcasing a huge cross-section of chrysanthemum types.



牡丹

PEONY

LATE NOVEMBER - FEBRUARY
JAPANESE NAME: BOTAN

As a symbol of wealth, good fortune, honour, daring and masculine bravery, it's clear why the peony is one of the most commonly featured flower tattoo motifs, with its thick heavy petals and distinct silhouette.

There are an estimated 3,000+ varieties of peony (known as botan in Japanese) in the world; the two most common types of peony found in Japan are the shakuyaku peony, and the botan peony.

“THE SHAKUYAKU
PEONY REPRESENTS
SHYNESS AND
PURITY.”

Easy to tell apart, shakuyaku peony grows on long, thin, grassy stems. Each shakuyaku only has one stem and no branches. On the other hand, botan grows on a tree-like base with thick, strong stems. Each flower has a different ‘personality’ attributed to it as well; the shakuyaku are seen to represent shyness, bashfulness, timidity, and purity, while dignity, elegance, and shyness are qualities given to the botan.

While its modern incarnation originated in China during the 8th century, the Chinese introduced the peony to Japan, who immediately adopted the bold, rugged petaled flower as their own. According to the history books, Buddhist monks brought the flower to Japan as part of



cultural exchange between the nations, known as the great flow of goods and ideas from China to Japan.

The flower loves the cooler, crisp winter months of November to February. However, at Ueno Park's Ueno Toshogu Peony Garden, you can see the flowers bloom between January to February, April to May, and September to November. It is worth noting that the garden is only open to the public twice a year, and

An early bloom peony in Japan. Flowers such as the peony have great importance in hanakotoba, which is the language of flowers in Japan.

the opening dates change depending on the year, so before you go it's best to do a little pre-planning.

For a deeper dive into peony culture, a visit to the Tsukuba Peony Garden in Ibaraki prefecture – just outside of Tokyo – is a very doable day trip.

Opening in 1989, the garden is proudly herbicide- and pesticide-free and boasts a spectacular, 20,000-large display of blooming peonies.



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CAMELLIA

JANUARY - APRIL
JAPANESE NAME: TSUBAKI

Part of Tokyo metropolis, the island of Izu Ōshima, located about 100km south of the heart of the capital, is a special place. It's home to sweeping 360-degree ocean views, the volcanic Mount Mihara, and a 3-million-large family of camellia flowers, which, blooming in winter, shape the island's culture quite unlike anything else.

The camellia is a strong plant; its thick leaves and bushy stems protect the island against the wind, which is why NHK TV presenter and journalist Judit Kawaguchi explains, “It's also grown on highways on the mainland, too.” The flower has a tiny knot-like seed in its centre, hard as a rock and looking a little like an almond; this seed is a source of excellent-quality oil.

“You can use this oil, and the people of Izu do, for a variety of purposes,” says Kawaguchi. “It's used in cooking, the taste is nutty and goes great with meats and vegetables. The oil can also be used for cosmetic purposes; that's why the women of Izu have such excellent skin and hair.”

Each year the island celebrates the arrival of the camellia blossoms with the Izu Ōshima Tsubaki Matsuri (Camellia) Festival. Held in late January to late March, it's a spectacular affair. Kawaguchi says, “When you arrive on the island during the festival, you're greeted by local women dressed in camellia yukata. They welcome every single person who gets off the boat with a camellia

flower.” The arrival of the festival and flower bring an electric ambience. “During the festival, many people from the mainland visit for the flowers,” says Kawaguchi. “Imagine all the trees blooming; it's a stunning sight. There are people playing taiko [drums]; it's a big matsuri [festival]. It's the most fun time of the year.”

A visit to Izu Ōshima during this time of year is an unforgettable opportunity to experience Tokyo from a whole new perspective.

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A camellia on Izu Ōshima. In olden times, the red camellia symbolised a noble death among Japanese samurai. Today they are more a symbol of love.