

Mt. Tabashine (Sakurayama)

Mt. Tabashine (595 meters) is on the east side of the Kitakami River across from Hiraizumi. It was renowned for its cherry blossoms and was known as Sakurayama (mountain of cherry blossoms) during the Heian period (794–1185). The poet Saigyō Hōshi (1118–1190) visited Hiraizumi twice. When he witnessed the blossoms, he compared them to Yoshino in Nara Prefecture, home to Japan’s most famous expanse of cherry trees:

How marvelous
the cherry blossoms of Mount Tabashine
I had never imagined
another place as beautiful
as Yoshino

The cherry trees had already died out by 1689 when haiku poet Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694) visited. Bashō was deeply influenced by Saigyō and sought to emulate him when he embarked on a journey through northern Japan. On reaching Hiraizumi, he paused at Takadachi, from which he would have seen Mt. Tabashine. In his record of the journey entitled *Oku no hosomichi (The Narrow Road to the Deep North)*, he pondered the lost glory of Hiraizumi.

In 1965, a massive kanji character (大) meaning “large,” was constructed on the mountain to mark the 20th anniversary of the end of World War II. This “Daimonji” (“large character”) is illuminated with bonfires on the last day of the summer Bon Festival, the annual Buddhist observance in which the souls of the dead are believed to temporarily return to this world. The fires are lit as a send-off when the souls return to the spirit world. The Daimonji also commemorates the four generations of Fujiwara lords, those who lost their lives in ancient wars, and people’s ancestors in general.

Today Mt. Tabashine is known for its many rhododendron flowers as well as its observatory at the summit, from which Hiraizumi’s Chūsonji Temple and the Koromo and Kitakami rivers are visible.