

Ganjin's Flowers

The lotus, arguably the most recognizable Buddhist symbol, is one of the flowers for which Toshodaiji is best known. From late June until mid-August, the temple grounds come alive with various types of lotus, in Buddhism a symbol of purity. It is said that those found in ponds and elsewhere in the grounds originate from seeds brought to Japan by Ganjin himself.

Another flower found at the temple is the Chinese snowball viburnum, whose fragrant white flower clusters bloom in late spring. Known as *keika* in Japan, this flower is also of great cultural significance in China where it is the emblem of Yangzhou, the place of Ganjin's birth.

Famous poet Hakushu Kitahara (1885–1942) wrote the following poem:

Looking at soft young oak leaves
A fragrance comes to me
that's even whiter than flowers.

(Mizunara no / yawaki wakaba wa / mime ni shite / hana yori mo nahoya / shiro-u niowamu)

Hakushu probably felt an affinity with Ganjin since the poet, too, was almost blind due to illness. The opening word "Mizunara" is a poetic device called "*kakekotoba*" (literary pun) where two meanings are conveyed through a homonym. In this case "Mizunara" (a species of oak tree native to Japan) also means "cannot see Nara."