

## Cherry Blossoms and Yoshinoyama

Yoshinoyama has been a famous cherry blossom viewing area since the Heian period (794–1185), attracting visitors from all across Japan.

The connection between Kinpusenji Temple and Yoshino's cherry blossoms is said to date back to the time of En no Gyoja (634–701), the founder of Shugendo. According to legend, he carved the Zao Gongen, manifestations of the Buddha in the form of native deities, on a *yamazakura* cherry tree after Zao Gongen appeared to him on this mountain.

For hundreds of years, the people of Yoshino have protected tens of thousands of *shiro-yamazakura* cherry trees that cover the mountain, a marvelous sight that has been immortalized in poems and songs. As the white-blossomed trees were considered sacred to Zao Gongen, there was a time when those who broke their branches were severely punished. Even today, visitors should be careful not to damage the trees.

A great deal of effort goes into ensuring the health and vitality of the cherry trees.

Yoshinoyama has always had a considerable number of wild cherry trees, but over the years, people coming to Yoshino to worship have continued to plant more. Today, nature-loving local residents carefully monitor the state of the trees and gather cherry

stones to cultivate more saplings, helping to preserve the trees and the landscape that have defined the Yoshinoyama area for centuries.

Throughout the season, the trees blossom in stages as warmer temperatures make their way up the mountain slopes. Thanks to this variation in altitude, the cherry blossom season lasts about three weeks in Yoshino, compared to one week in most other areas of Japan.