

Takachiho Shrine: Chichibu Cedar

The 800-year-old tree standing to the left of the main hall's sanctuary is called the Chichibu Cedar. The towering 55-meter tree is 9 meters in circumference. According to legend, it was planted by the twelfth-century samurai Hatakeyama Shigetada (1164–1205), a renowned figure who appears in the fourteenth-century epic, *Tale of the Heike* (*Heike monogatari*), and often portrayed in paintings and public statues. Hatakeyama planted the tree upon being sent to the shrine by Minamoto no Yoritomo (1147–1199), first shogun of the Kamakura shogunate, to pray for peace and tranquility in the country. An interesting historical footnote is that Hatakeyama had, in fact, planted two cedars, but the second one fell over during a typhoon in 1992 and its wood was milled to build the shrine's Kagura Hall. The surviving tree's name is said to come from Hatakeyama's home of Chichibu, in present-day Saitama Prefecture, a town also known for many sacred *sugi* preserved from antiquity.

The precincts of Takachiho Shrine is thick with cedar trees (*sugi*) that have been standing for centuries. Their presence adds to the sense of the presence of the divine and the harmony with nature felt throughout the grounds. Often the trees are encircled with *shimenawa*, lengths of rice-straw or hemp rope used to signal a ritually purified or sacred space and ward off evil spirits. When placed around trees like the cedars at Takachiho Shrine, they also indicate the presence of spirits known as *kodama* and cutting them down is therefore forbidden.