

## 【Orchard Parks】

In Chichibu there are many “orchard parks”—facilities where guests can enjoy hand-picked, farm-fresh food and various agricultural activities in a natural setting. Most orchard parks are structured around picking and eating local fruits, and some feature outdoor dining and barbecue facilities, cooking classes, petting zoos, fishing, flower gardens, and hiking paths.

Fruit is the focal point of many of Chichibu’s orchard parks. Most orchard parks offer inexpensive, all-you-can-eat seasonal fruit-picking, and some also sell fruit by weight for visitors to take home. Once referred to as “water sweets” (*mizugashi*), fruit has always been a prized commodity in Japan. It is valued for both its taste and appearance, and fruit cultivation often involves labor-intensive procedures that ensure the final product is free from imperfections: blossoms are hand-pollinated, and less-desirable fruits are carefully culled. Bunches of grapes and apples are individually wrapped with a bag as they grow in order to protect their skins from insects and the elements. Because of such extensive hand-cultivation, fruit in Japan can be quite expensive and is often considered a luxury item. The experience of picking and eating perfect, ripe fruit straight from the vine is a rare treat.

Strawberries are one of the most popular fruits offered by orchard parks. As strawberries are in greatest demand during the winter months, they are raised in greenhouses and timed to ripen between December and June. Varieties found in Chichibu include the Yayoihime, Tochiotome, and Benihoppe cultivars. Some orchard parks even offer fresh strawberry juice and strawberry ice cream.

Grapes are another common offering. Ready for picking from August through November, grapes in Chichibu come in many varieties. The large, dark-purple Kyohō grape has been grown in Japan for centuries. Newer cultivars include Pione, Himrod Seedless, Muscat Bailey A, Queen Nina, and Shine Muscat. Chichibu even has its own local variety with a registered trademark, the seedless Mountain Ruby. Unlike other fruit, prices for grapes and grape-picking vary depending on the variety.

Chichibu’s orchard parks grow many other fruits as well. Blueberries are in season from June to August, apples from September to November, and the lemon-like citrus fruit *kabosu* from September to December. Some non-fruits are also available: chestnuts and sweet potatoes come into season in autumn, and shiitake mushrooms are available throughout the year. In Chichibu, shiitake are still grown the old-fashioned way—by taking logs seeded with mushroom spores to sprout in the forest, rather than growing them in sawdust.

The orchard parks also include dining areas. Greenhouse ceilings, tree canopies, or even living grape arbors form the roofs over seating areas that can accommodate large parties. Many places will supply the meat, vegetables, and equipment for barbecue or Japanese hot pot (*nabe*). Some parks have full restaurants or offer noodle-making classes in which visitors eat their own hand-made soba and udon. Trout fishing is another popular feature at orchard parks, and some allow guests to grill their catches over charcoal and eat them then and there.

Not all the activities at orchard parks involve eating—many parks keep animals such as ducks, rabbits, goats, and even ponies to pet and feed. Children can learn to make traditional propeller toys from bamboo or catch stag beetles to take home as pets. Some orchard parks have scenic gardens or are adjacent to mountains with short hiking courses—perfect for taking in the autumn foliage. For visitors looking for gifts or local products to take home, orchard parks have packaged fruit, jams, and many other retail items for sale.