

The Bonsai Village Today

Almost a century since it was established, Omiya Bonsai Village continues to fulfill the vision of its founding artisans. What was once disused land on the periphery of town now thrives, in its own quiet and unhurried way, as Japan's principal hub of bonsai culture. Seven dedicated bonsai gardens or nurseries, run mostly by second, third, fourth, and even fifth-generation artisans, cultivate and sell some of the most exquisite bonsai to be found in Japan. The nurseries also tend cherished bonsai on behalf of their owners, develop new techniques in the centuries-old art form, and spread awareness and knowledge through education.

Most of the bonsai gardens are within walking distance of each other and can be reached from either Toro Station (on the JR Utsunomiya Line) or Omiya Koen Station (Tobu Urban Park Line). Each garden offers a variety of bonsai species and designs, from modest to imposingly large in size. True bonsai aficionados, though, know that each Omiya bonsai garden is associated with a particular style or technique. This diversity is the produce of the healthy competition within the village-like community. Fuyo-en, for example, is famed for its seasonally changing *zoki* trees, while Kyuka-en, the second-oldest extant garden, is noted for its development of bonsai tools.

Despite the image bonsai has long held in Japan of being a pastime of the wealthy elite—understandable given the number of distinguished statesmen who have been bonsai lovers—at Omiya Bonsai Village small bonsai are available for as little as one thousand yen.

In addition to the village itself, local bonsai-related attractions include a seminar room and rest area named Bonsai Shiki no Ie (Bonsai House of the Four Seasons), and of course the Omiya Bonsai Art Museum which works closely with the bonsai gardens. A highlight of the year is when the gardens come together in May to present the Bonsai Festival.

Also nearby and worth seeing are the Uetake Inari Shinto shrine, location of a monument dedicated to Shimizu Ritaro (1874–1955), a key figure in the establishment of Omiya Bonsai Village; and the Manga Kaikan museum at the former atelier of manga artist Kitazawa Rakuten (1876–1955).

The path to the present day has not always been smooth for the Omiya Bonsai Village:

the difficulties of the past and challenges it faces today closely parallel those of Japan itself. In the pre-World War II years there were some 35 bonsai gardens before wartime circumstances forced the majority of them to close. After the war, bonsai artists revived their profession as the nation grew into an economic powerhouse. In the twenty-first century, declining growth of both the economy and the population have had serious implications for the bonsai industry, with the number of bonsai practitioners showing a clear decrease. Nonetheless, bonsai is truly a labor of love for Omiya's bonsai artisans, assuring the continued vitality and relevance of this horticultural art form.