

【Azalea Fields】

In late June, the fields east of Mount Yunomaru turn a vivid scarlet as an expanse of some 600,000 Japanese azalea blossoms burst into bloom. The fields were designated a Natural Monument in 1956, not only for being one of the largest concentrations of *Rhodendron japonicum* in the country, but also due to their high-altitude location and rich color variation.

Since the medieval period (twelfth to sixteenth centuries), livestock owners have used the slopes as pastureland for cows and horses. As the animals grazed, they consumed other types of vegetation but left the azaleas, which are toxic. With no other species to compete against, the azaleas spread freely across the mountainside.

One local legend offers a memorable explanation for the vibrant red blossoms: it is said that long ago, a girl from Tōmi fell in love with a boy from Tsumagoi, a village to the north. So strong was their love that every night she ran the 15 kilometers over the mountains to meet with him before returning to Tōmi. The elders of Tsumagoi disapproved of their behavior and decided to put a stop to it. Unwilling to be parted, the young lovers met for one last time at Jizō Peak, where they leapt off together. Their blood scattered across the fields below and became the azalea blossoms.