

## Vegetation on Dewa Sanzan

Dewa Sanzan has a great diversity of plant life. The foothills of Mt. Gassan (1,984 m) are populated with 200- to 300-year-old beech trees. Their wide canopies dominate the forest, making it difficult for other tall plant species to survive. At higher elevations, the landscape changes dramatically. Alpine vegetation thrives there where the strong winds on Mt. Gassan's upper reaches prevent taller plant species from growing.

The Japanese cedar forests on Mt. Haguro (414 m) are around 300 to 500 years old, with the notable exception of Jiji-sugi, a cedar estimated to be about 1,000 years old. Most of these trees were planted over three generations under orders of priests from the mountain's temples. They were introduced to make the ground more stable, prevent landslides, and, ultimately, make the pilgrimage more accessible.

The links between nature and spirituality are strong here. The vegetation in this area has been used in a variety of ways by followers of Shugendo, an ancient tradition of mountain asceticism incorporating elements of both Buddhism and Shinto. Historically, followers lived self-sufficiently, relying entirely on the plants that grew on the mountain for food and medicine. They believed that using plants helped them harness the power of the mountain. They tested plants themselves, and the botanical knowledge they gained through trial and error was handed down from generation to generation. People living in surrounding villages relied on Shugendo practitioners' experience for natural remedies for a range of maladies from hangovers to arthritis. *Uwabamiso* (*Elatostema umbellatum* var. *majus*), a leafy perennial, was used to treat insect bites and cuts. *Kibanaikariso* (*Epimedium grandiflorum* subsp. *Koreanum*), a yellow-flowering plant, was used as a restorative tonic and to treat arthritis. *Koshiabura* (*Chengiopanax sciadophylloides*), a native deciduous tree, was used to reduce blood pressure, and *yamabudo* (*Vitis coignetiae*), a wild grape native to Asia, was used to treat skin blotches.