

## Wild Vegetables (*Sansai*)

The harvest of edible wild plant species collectively known as *sansai* is part of traditional food culture in Japan. Historically, *sansai* were an important food source in early spring, when field crops were not yet ready for harvest. The tradition of collecting and consuming *sansai* continues today, and dozens of varieties are served in homes, restaurants, and lodgings. They can be boiled, pickled, made into tempura, or added to dishes such as soba noodles and hotpots.

The word *sansai* literally means “mountain vegetable,” but the term includes species that grow near coasts and in grasslands as well. Traditionally, the word “mountain” could be used to indicate “wilderness” in contrast with “field,” which implied civilization and cultivation. “Mountain vegetables” were the counterpart to “field vegetables” (*yasai*), the word that refers to crops like tomatoes, corn, and cabbages. Unlike cultivated crops, most *sansai* are initially bitter and require some degree of preparation to render them edible.

### Varieties of *Sansai*

*Sansai* culture is especially strong in the snowy, mountainous region of Shirakami Sanchi, where dozens of wild vegetable species grow in the forests and along roadsides. One variety is *uwabamisō*, also known as *mizu* (“water”) due to its preference for wet habitats. A plant of the nettle family, it can be found on riverbanks, road embankments, and mountain slopes. *Mizu* stems are stripped of their outer skins, leaving a juicy inner portion that, when boiled, is similar in texture to cooked celery. Giant butterbur (*fuki*) is another wild plant with edible stems and leaves, and it grows prolifically throughout the area. *Nemagaridake*, the slender new shoots of Chishima bamboo grass, are served simmered and seasoned as a side dish, or incorporated in soups. The shoots of Japanese spikenard (*udo*), a relative of ginseng, are often added to soups and salads or fried as tempura.

### Mushrooms

Although not technically *sansai*, many varieties of edible mushrooms grow wild in Shirakami Sanchi. *Nameko* are small, amber-colored mushrooms with a slippery coating that are often eaten in miso soup. Honey mushrooms (*naratake*, known locally as *sawamodashi*) are also excellent in soups and hotpots. Both species grow in thick clusters on fallen tree trunks. Even more prized is hen-of-the-woods—called *maitake* (“dancing mushroom”) for the joyful reaction its discovery is said to provoke. While many Japanese supermarkets now sell cultivated hen-of-the-woods, the flavor of wild *maitake* is considered far superior.

Russula-like waxy caps (*sakura shimeji*), bovine boletes (*amitake*), and clustered dome-caps (*hatake shimeji*) can also be found in the area. However, because edible mushrooms often closely resemble poisonous ones, visitors are strongly advised to gather them with an experienced guide. Excursions for collecting mushrooms and *sansai* can be booked at Mori no Eki (next door to the Shirakami-Sanchi World Heritage Conservation Center Fujisato Facility), where many local *sansai* varieties are also sold. Alternatively, arrangements can be made through some of the private-residence lodgings (*minpaku*) in Fujisato, or by contacting [info@fujisato.info](mailto:info@fujisato.info).