

Iwamadera Temple

Iwamadera Temple was founded in 722 by the Buddhist priest Taicho (682–767). According to legend, he heard the mantra of Kannon, the bodhisattva of compassion, coming from the mountain's abundant katsura trees (*Cercidiphyllum japonicum*) and knew the spot must be sacred to Kannon. A shrine at the back of the temple grounds enshrines the deity of a giant katsura tree believed to be more than 500 years old.

Iwamadera is dedicated to Kannon and the temple's main object of worship is a 15-centimeter-tall gilt-bronze statue of the deity. The statue used to be housed within a wooden sculpture of Kannon that was reputedly carved from a katsura tree by Taicho himself. The wooden statue has been lost, and the gilt-bronze statue is kept in the main hall (*hondo*), which was reconstructed in 1577. The ancient figure is not on public display, but a larger statue of Kannon can be viewed instead. At Iwamadera, Kannon is also believed to prevent the debilitating effects of advanced age, and the temple holds special rituals to aid mental acuity. The garden beside the main hall is said to be the inspiration for a famous haiku by the poet Matsuo Basho (1644–1694), who composed it after a visit to Iwamadera.