

## **Hieda Horse-chestnut Tree**

A giant Japanese horse-chestnut tree (*tochi*; *Aesculus turbinata*) stands just off the main road in the quiet village of Hieda. The tree marks the former site of Jorakuji Temple, a modest sanctuary of the Jodo Shinshu (True Pure Land) school of Buddhism now located up the hill and across the road. According to local legend, the tree's protruding roots once provided a resting place for Rennyo (1415–1499), an influential priest credited with unifying the various sects of Jodo Shinshu and turning the school into the most prominent Buddhist movement in Japan. Stories associated with Rennyo and other distinguished followers of Jodo Shinshu are common in Shirakawa-go and the surrounding region, where the school has played an important part in religious life since medieval times.

In addition to its spiritual significance, the Hieda horse-chestnut was historically an important source of food. The lack of arable land in Shirakawa-go meant that berries, fruits, and nuts such as the horse chestnut played a significant role in the local diet, especially in winter. This was in spite of the fact that horse chestnuts are extremely time-consuming to prepare as food. Once gathered, they need to be soaked in water for a few days to remove insects and dried for several days for preservation. Before cooking, the nuts are soaked again for days to soften the shells so they can be removed, then covered in warm water and lye made from ash to remove their astringency. Finally, they can be steamed with glutinous rice and the mixture pounded to make mochi cakes.