

The Seasons at Urakuen

As in many traditional arts, the seasons are an important element of tea practice. Tea gatherings are often held to mark seasonal events, and seasonal symbolism dictates the host's selection of decorations and tea utensils. Likewise, Japanese gardens are designed to show the beauty of the changing seasons throughout the year. At Urakuen, the seasons are expressed in ways as subtle as the color of a bean-paste sweet or as stunning as a cherry tree in full bloom.

In the conventions of traditional Japanese poetry, the year is divided not just into four seasons but also into 24 separate periods, each with its own seasonal flower, fruit, bird, or other hallmark of that time of year. For instance, plum blossoms and Japanese bush warblers are associated with early spring; the full moon and waving tufts of silvergrass are symbols of early autumn. At a tea gathering, these symbols appear most prominently in the hanging scroll and flower arrangement displayed in the tokonoma alcove. The scroll may be a painting that depicts a seasonal image, or it may be calligraphy that references a seasonal event. The flower arrangement will include a flower or other plant that reflects the time of year.

The Chabana-en, or "Tea-Flower Garden," of Urakuen is a special area where tea flowers bloom year-round. This secluded area of the outer garden lies east of Kō-an, where a shaded path crosses a stone bridge and passes a waterfall. The water flows from the top of an artificial hill, which gives a sense of depth to the landscape. The garden is planted with many varieties of camellia—Uraku's favorite—as well as fragrant snowbell, wintersweet, and bridal wreath spirea.

During tea gatherings, more subtle reflections of the season can be seen in the kimonos worn by hosts and guests, the shape and decoration of the tea bowls, and the types of sweet served with the tea. At Urakuen, guests receive sweets with borders lightly tinted in one of four colors: pink in spring, green in summer, orange in autumn, and white in winter.