

Diverse Plant Life in Kikuchi Gorge

Kikuchi Gorge is famous for its diverse plant life. The changes in elevation from one end of the 4-kilometer gorge to the other result in a wide range of growing conditions. The elevation at the lower end of the gorge, where the visitor center is located, is around 500 meters, whereas the point considered the start of the gorge is 800 meters above sea level. As you proceed uphill through the gorge, the vegetation changes gradually from evergreen trees to deciduous species such as zelkovas and maples, and then on to beech and conifer forest in the colder upper reaches.

Common trees in the warm forest around the visitor center include the **Japanese cinnamon** (*yabunikkei*; *Cinnamomum yabunikkei*), whose dark-green leaves are fragrant and glossy with three distinctive veins; the **urajiro-gashi** (“white back”) **ring-cupped oak** (*Quercus salicina*), so named because its thick, leathery leaves are whitish on the back side; and the **isunoki witch hazel** (*Distylium racemosum*), whose tiny red, petalless flowers bloom in dense clusters from March to April.

Two plants readily visible along the walking paths are the thread-like bright-green **kiyosumi-ito moss** (*Barbella flagellifera*), which thrives in the wet and humid conditions near the river and hangs down as much as 20 centimeters from tree branches and rocks throughout the gorge, and the **iwatabako** (“rock tobacco”; *Conandron ramondioides*), a species with large, tobacco-like leaves that flourishes on damp rocks. Its star-shaped, light purple flowers bloom in summer.