

Symbolic Plants of Amami-Oshima

Several plants are considered to be “symbols” of the island.

Fragrant screw pine / *Pandanus odoratissimus* / Adan / アダン

The fragrant screw pine grows in clusters in sandy or rocky areas—and sometimes on the lower mountain slopes—near the coast on Amami-Oshima and in other tropical and subtropical regions. It can grow over 5 meters tall, though it often hugs the ground. It has sharp spiny leaves, and a large fruit that looks a little like a pineapple. Aerial roots extend from the slender trunk to the ground, supporting it in strong shore winds. It is sometimes planted on beaches as protection against storms and tidal surges.

Sago palm / *Cycas revoluta* / Sotetsu / ソテツ

These stout plants with woody trunks and a crown of large evergreen leaves are not actually palms at all, but gymnosperms, like conifers and ginkgo trees. They grow very slowly over hundreds of years, and were so abundant during the Jurassic period (201 to 145 million years ago) that botanists refer to that epoch as the “Age of Sago Palms.” During difficult times in the past, Amami-Oshima islanders used a method of processing the toxic fruit to make flour, thereby adding starch to their diet. The flour is still used on the island to make a kind of miso called *nari-miso*.

Inedible taro / *Alocasia odora* / Kuwazu-imo / クワズイモ

The root of the inedible taro plant protrudes from the earth, and is often found in semi-shaded areas of the forests of Amami-Oshima. It has long stems leading to heart-shaped, bright green leaves that are large enough to be used as an umbrella. While it looks similar to taro, the root is not edible—in fact, it is poisonous.

Bellflower cherry / *Prunus campanulata* / Kan-hizakura / カンヒザクラ

This subtropical wild cherry tree grows at the edges of mountain forests on Amami-Oshima. The tree can reach a height of 10 meters, with bell-shaped flowers—in colors from dark pink to white—that face downward. Unlike sakura species on mainland Japan, the trees begin flowering in December, and the blossoms last through March. This tree is very popular with visitors, but in fact is an invasive alien species on this island.

Japanese banana / *Musa basjoo* / Basho / バシヨウ

This member of the banana family grows to a height of 2 to 3 meters, with very large

leaves and fruit that resembles cultivated bananas. People of the Ryukyu and Amami Islands have traditionally used the fibers of the leaves to make cloth for a garment called a *bashagin*. The famous haiku poet Basho Matsuo took his name from a favorite banana tree that grew in his garden.