

Momijien Garden and Tomoegaoka Villa

Tomoegaoka Villa was built in 1896 by the affluent Takahashi family, and a large garden with maple and cherry trees was planted around it. In 1989, the property became a public garden known as Momijien (“maple garden”). It contains approximately 400 trees, many of which are over 150 years old; various seasonal flowers and plants, water features, stone lanterns, and Buddhist statues decorate the grounds. Momijien is popular in spring for cherry blossoms and in autumn for brightly colored foliage and an event called the Momiji Matsuri (Maple Festival), held from late October to late November.

Momijien is open from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. every day except Wednesdays from April through November. Admission to the garden is free, but a guided tour of Tomoegaoka Villa (in Japanese) costs 200 yen and requires an advance reservation. Near the entrance gate is the Takakugura Café, a converted traditional storehouse where customers can purchase drinks, sweets, and light meals. The café is open on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays.

Maple Garden

Momijien covers around 4,000 square meters, and most of its trees are maples. Five species of maple were specially brought from Kyoto when the garden was originally planted; among them, the classic Japanese maples (*Acer palmatum*) are the most numerous. In autumn, the garden is illuminated in the evenings for the Maple Festival. The colors of the leaves are usually the brightest in mid-November.

In addition to maples, Momijien contains Yoshino cherry (*Prunus yedoensis*) and mountain cherry trees (*Cerasus jamasakura*). It was the first garden in Niigata Prefecture where Yoshino cherries from Tokyo were planted as an experiment to see if they could survive the cold northern winters. At present, the trees are thriving, adding delicate pink shades to the landscape when they bloom in spring. Other seasonal flowers can be seen along the garden paths, and the eastern side of Momijien offers a panoramic view of the city. Several stone Buddhist sculptures, including one of Kannon, the bodhisattva of compassion, are placed throughout the grounds.

Tomoegaoka Villa

Until the early twentieth century, Tomoegaoka Villa belonged to the Takahashi family, wealthy landowners from the Kamiya area of present-day Nagaoka. The construction was

ordered by Takahashi Kuro (1851–1922), the tenth head of the family. He was a politician dedicated to improving the lives of people from the lower socioeconomic classes during Japan's industrial revolution. Many influential guests visited Tomoegaoka Villa to debate and exchange ideas, including Sidney Webb (1859–1947), a British economist and reformer, and his wife Beatrice Webb (1858–1943), a sociologist and socioeconomic researcher.

The villa is a single-story, hipped-roof structure built in the *yosemune-zukuri* architecture style. Inside, there is a tea room and several traditional parlors with poetic names such as Sakura no Ma (“cherry chamber”), Momiji no Ma (“maple chamber”), Irori no Ma (“hearth chamber”), and Matsuki no Ma (“pine chamber”). The view of the garden from the Momiji no Ma is considered one of the best, particularly in spring when the maple leaves are fresh and green, or in autumn when they turn vibrant shades of red and orange.

Tomoegaoka Villa is a Registered Tangible Cultural Property of Japan.