

Momijien Garden and Tomoegaoka Villa

The vast grounds of Momijien contain approximately 400 trees, many of which are maple and cherry trees that are over 150 years old. The lush garden and the traditional Tomoegaoka Villa were originally created in 1896 for the Takahashi family, who were wealthy landowners in the neighboring Kamiya area. At present, Momijien is a public garden that is particularly popular in spring for cherry blossoms and in autumn for the brightly colored foliage, which is illuminated at night for the Momiji Matsuri (Maple Festival) held from late October to late November.

Admission to the garden is free, but a guided tour (in Japanese) of Tomoegaoka Villa, a Registered Tangible Cultural Property of Japan, costs 200 yen and requires an advance reservation. Momijien is closed on Wednesdays and in winter (from December through March). A small traditional storehouse near the entrance gate has been converted into the Takakugura Café, where customers can purchase drinks, sweets, and light meals. The café is open on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays.

Maple Garden

Momijien (“maple garden”) covers around 4,000 square meters. Befitting the garden’s name, many of the trees on the vast grounds are maples. Five species of maple were specially brought from Kyoto when the garden was originally planted, and among them, the classic Japanese maples (*Acer palmatum*) are the most numerous.

The garden also contains Yoshino cherry (*Prunus yedoensis*) and mountain cherry trees (*Cerasus jamasakura*). Momijien was the first garden in Niigata Prefecture to plant Yoshino cherry trees from Tokyo to see whether they could survive the cold northern winters. Now, these trees are thriving, adding delicate pink hues to the landscape each spring.

Various seasonal flowers, including azaleas, lilies, wisterias, and hydrangeas, grow along the garden paths. Several stone sculptures of Buddhist divinities, including Kannon, the bodhisattva of compassion, and Yakushi Buddha, the deity of medicine and healing, are placed throughout the grounds. An overlook on the eastern side of Momijien offers a wide view of the city districts below.

Tomoegaoka Villa

The layout of Momijien is centered on Tomoegaoka Villa, which used to be a residence of the Takahashi family in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Takahashi Kuro (1851–1922), the tenth head of the family, ordered the construction of the villa. He was a politician dedicated to improving the welfare of people in lower socioeconomic classes during Japan's rapid industrialization. Many influential guests visited him in the 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. It contains a tea room and a number of 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 maple garden when sitting on the tatami-mat floor of the Momiji no Ma is considered one of the best in the villa.