

Yukiguni Botanical Gardens

The Yukiguni (“Snow Country”) Botanical Gardens contain over 850 species of plants native to the snow-heavy *satoyama* areas of Nagaoka. *Satoyama* (literally “village mountains”) are areas in the foothills where people traditionally farmed, foraged, and gathered firewood. The use of natural resources was carefully managed in a sustainable way that helped conserve local ecosystems. With technological advances and urban migration, *satoyama* no longer play a part in people’s daily lives. Without adequate maintenance, these valuable ecosystems are increasingly becoming overgrown and damaged by invasive species, threatening their biodiversity. The Yukiguni Botanical Gardens are specially dedicated to preserving a balanced *satoyama* environment without any alpine, coastal, non-native, or ornamental plants. Even though the grounds look somewhat wild compared to more decorative, manicured gardens, they represent an authentic natural environment that encourages visitors to spend time exploring, learning, and enjoying the scenery.

The Yukiguni Botanical Gardens are open between mid-March and mid-November from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Admission is 400 yen for adults, 50 yen for students, and free for pre-school children. Guided tours are available with prior reservation by phone. Please note that tours take one to two hours and are conducted in Japanese.

A Haven for Native Species through the Seasons

Many species of native plants bloom from spring to autumn at the Yukiguni Botanical Gardens. Some notable spring flowers are *yukiwariso* primrose (*Hepatica nobilis* var. *japonica*), dogtooth violet, mountain cherry, and rabbit-ear iris. Summer is the season for Ezo hydrangea, bellflower, silk tree, and several types of lilies. The species that bloom in autumn include willow herb, red spider lily, Japanese beautyberry, gentian, and Japanese silverleaf (*tsuwabuki*). Various birds, insects, and other animals can be seen in the gardens throughout the year, including close to 80 species of birds, 45 species of butterflies, 40 species of dragonflies, and forest animals such as rabbits and tanuki raccoon dogs.

Yukiwariso Primrose: A Symbol of Nagaoka

One of the plants that the Yukiguni Botanical Gardens are particularly focused on preserving is *yukiwariso* (literally “flower that breaks through the snow”), also known as hepatica or bird’s-eye primrose. These flowers are among the first to appear as the snow melts, making them a symbol of the coming spring. They bloom low to the ground in pink,

white, and bluish-purple, blanketing *satoyama* slopes as a colorful herald of the changing seasons. *Yukiwariso* primroses have become rarer due to habitat loss and overpicking, but in Nagaoka they are carefully cultivated at the Yukiguni Botanical Gardens, Myohoji Temple, and the Echigo Hillside Park.

A Place for the Community

The Yukiguni Botanical Gardens were created in 1984 to serve the community and promote nature conservation. The staff are primarily volunteers, including senior citizens dedicated to passing on their knowledge to younger generations. Students attend classes at the gardens, and public courses are held on topics that appeal to children, such as raising rhinoceros beetles. Fireflies can be seen from mid-June to early July during special seasonal night hours. Birdwatching events guided by the Nagaoka Wild Bird Society take place in spring and autumn.