

## Yukiguni Botanical Gardens

The Yukiguni (“Snow Country”) Botanical Gardens contain more than 850 species of plants native to the snow-heavy *satoyama* areas of Nagaoka. *Satoyama* (literally “village mountains”) are areas in the foothills where people used to farm, forage, and gather firewood. The use of natural resources was carefully managed in a sustainable way that helped conserve local ecosystems. With the advance of technology and depopulation of rural areas, *satoyama* no longer play a part in people’s daily lives. Left alone, these delicate ecosystems revert to regular forestland, increasingly becoming overgrown and damaged by invasive species, which threatens their biodiversity. The Yukiguni Botanical Gardens are dedicated to preserving a balanced *satoyama* environment without any alpine, coastal, non-native, or ornamental plants.

### *Navigating the Gardens*

Seasonal flowers that are currently in bloom are marked on a large map (in Japanese) to the right of the ticket counter. The map also has photos showing what birds, butterflies, and other insects might be encountered. Exploring every path through the Yukiguni Botanical Gardens may take up to five hours, so checking the seasonal map is recommended before planning a route within the available time.

### *A Haven for Native Species through the Seasons*

Various native plants bloom in the gardens from spring to autumn. These include *yukiwariso* primrose (*Hepatica nobilis* var. *japonica*), dogtooth violet, mountain cherry, and rabbit-ear iris in spring; Ezo hydrangea, bellflower, silk tree, and several types of lilies in summer; and willow herb, red spider lily, Japanese beautyberry, gentian, and Japanese silverleaf (*tsuwabuki*) in autumn. Many birds, insects, and other animals can be seen 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”), which is also known as hepatica or bird’s-eye primrose. These flowers are one of 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 the *satoyama* slopes as a colorful herald of the changing seasons. *Yukiwariso* flowers 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 many senior citizens dedicated to passing on their knowledge to younger generations. Special public courses are held at the gardens on topics that appeal to children. Fireflies can be seen from mid-June to early July during special night hours. Birdwatching events under the auspices of the Nagaoka Wild Bird Society take place in spring and autumn.