

Snow Country's Grove of Beauties: Bijinbayashi

Just a few minutes' walk from the Echigo-Matsunoyama Museum of Natural Science "Kyororo" is a grove of some 3,000 slender beech trees stretching toward the sky. This ethereal landscape is called Bijinbayashi, "the wood of beautiful women," and it has brought photographers and nature lovers to the area for nearly half a century.

Japanese beech trees (*Fagus crenata*) are an alpine species that grows in cooler climates. In central Honshu, they typically are found at elevations around 1,000 meters. Every five to seven years they produce a huge number of seeds (beech nuts), but most of those that sprout are doomed to wither beneath the canopy of older trees, which block the light. How, then, did this mountainside—which is only about 300 meters in elevation—produce such a dense wood of beech trees, so alike in size and shape? As with many things in Tokamachi, the answer relates to snow. The beeches in Bijinbayashi can grow at this low elevation because the long winters and heavy snowfall in Tokamachi create an alpine-like environment. In addition, snow limits the growth of competing species, but keeps the beech trees' autumn seedfall moist and protected from hungry rodents until spring.

The beeches' unusually straight, slender trunks and similar size are the product of local history. The area used to be a natural beech forest with trees of varied sizes and ages. In the 1910s, the landowner needed money to finance his move to Tokyo. He decided to cut down all the mature trees and sell them for making charcoal. The following spring, the saplings that remained had no competition for sunlight. Without taller competitors to edge around, the young trees had little need for sideways growth or branches. They grew straight up, stretching toward the sun in willowy unison. Residents were so charmed by the grove that they have preserved the area as a scenic attraction.

Some of the trees in Bijinbayashi grow out from the soil at an angle before straightening toward the sky. This phenomenon, common in snow country, is called *nemagari*, or "root curving." Each winter, heavy snow presses down on the still-pliable saplings, bending them under the weight. Once the snow melts, the trees grow upward again, but over the years, this cycle produces a J-shaped curve that becomes a permanent part of the trunk. Traditionally, local woodworkers used *nemagari* timber to craft roofing beams and snow tools that benefit from the strength of the trees' natural curve.

A shady trail loops through the forest's 3 hectares, making Bijinbayashi a pleasant place to visit in the warmer months. In winter, limited ground cover and the snow-covered scenery make it a popular destination for snowshoeing.