

Nihonmatsu Castle through the Seasons

Spring and Summer

Kasumigajo Castle Park is renowned for its cherry blossoms. A Sakura (Cherry Blossom) Festival is held from April to May each year, with live music and other attractions. Throughout the spring and summer other flowers bloom in their turn, including violets, wisteria, and hydrangeas. All of these were planted after the castle grounds became a public park, representing a new stage in the castle's history as a treasured part of the community.

The Lantern Festival

The Lantern Festival, held over three nights starting on the first Saturday in October, lights up the city of Nihonmatsu as the heat of summer

recedes, giving way to autumn. Seven huge floats covered with lanterns and carrying festival musicians playing flute and percussion roll through the city. Each float is some 11 meters high and covered with 300 paper lanterns with real candles inside. These require constant replacement by attendants who nimbly clamber over the float to reach lanterns as their candles go out. By the end of the night, more than 1,500 candles have been used by each float.

The festival dates to 1664, when it was begun by Niwa Mitsushige. Each of the seven floats comes from a different neighborhood in Nihonmatsu. On the last night of the festival, a parade of the floats leaves from the castle's Minowa Gate.

Autumn Chrysanthemums

When the castle's foliage turns gold and red in autumn, it is illuminated by night along walking paths opened to residents and visitors. From mid-

October to late November, Kasumigajo Castle Park also hosts Nihonmatsu's annual Chrysanthemum Festival. This event is renowned for its life-sized dolls and dioramas covered in or made entirely from chrysanthemums. Each year has a theme, and participating horticulturalists and teams compete to create the most elaborate and beautiful displays on that theme.

The modern Chrysanthemum Festival was founded in 1955, but chrysanthemum cultivation as a hobby originated with the samurai of Nihonmatsu Castle, who held shows to demonstrate their mastery of the art. The tradition evidently survived the fall of the castle itself, as visitors in the early twentieth century noted that the chrysanthemum shows in Nihonmatsu were "the best in the prefecture."

In winter, fallen snow blankets the park and gives it a quieter, more contemplative air. The *honmaru* offers clear views through the crisp air of Mt. Adatara and the other mountains to the west, whose slopes are also

covered in deep snow.