

Exploring the Grounds: Part 2

Lawn Square, Volunteer Garden, Wetland Garden, Hydrangea Garden

Lawn Square

The lawn just behind the water lily pond adjoins Lake Biwa. This part of the lake was the site of the 13-hectare lotus patch that originally inspired the creation of Kusatsu Aquatic Botanical Garden Mizunomori. In 2016, the lotus plants failed to regenerate. There is still a fine view across the lake to Mt. Mikami, a 432-meter-high mountain known as “Omi Fuji,” because its conical shape is reminiscent of Mt. Fuji. (Omi is the old provincial name for Shiga Prefecture.)

Between the path and the lake is a cluster of evergreens. These include common Japanese trees such as the momi fir (*Abies firma*), longleaf pine (*Pinus palustris*), dawn redwood (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*), and Japanese nutmeg yew (*Torreya nucifera*). A raft where freshwater pearls were once cultivated is visible beyond the trees.

Volunteer Garden

The Volunteer Garden, as the name suggests, is the work of around 30 volunteers who have an interest in plants and flowers. This garden provides a hands-on opportunity for them to learn the basics of gardening and improve their skills. The plants are selected through collaborative discussions and bring to mind a typical English garden.

Wetland Garden

Japanese irises (*hanashobu*) are the highlight of the Wetland Garden. During the Edo period (1603–1868), members of the samurai class cultivated irises competitively. As a result, there are different cultivars from different Edo-period domains around Japan. Here you can see irises from Ise (present-day Mie and Wakayama Prefectures), Edo (present-day Tokyo), and Higo (present-day Kumamoto Prefecture). Note also the aerial roots of the bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) around the iris beds. The roots protrude from the soil to escape excessive dampness and “breathe”

above ground.

One flower that has long played a role in Japanese arts and crafts is the *aobana* (*Commelina communis* var. *hortensis*). Literally “blue flower” in Japanese, it is a variety of the daylily cultivated only in the vicinity of Kusatsu. *Aobana*-derived blue dye is used for the underpainting in *yuzen* and *shiborizome* dyeing. It was also the primary source of blue for ukiyo-e woodblock prints until the early nineteenth century, when synthetic Prussian Blue dye imported from Germany rendered it obsolete.

Other plants to seek out in the Wetland Garden include the purple Chinese ground orchid, known as *shiran* in Japan (*Bletilla striata* var. *striata*), and seven varieties of Japanese silvergrass, which turn to subtle shades of silver in the autumn. Another classic autumn bloom is the daisy-like yellow flower of the ground-hugging leopard plant, known as *tsuwabuki* in Japan (*Farfugium japonicum*), which is often found near ponds in Japanese gardens.

Hydrangea Garden

One of the most popular flowering shrubs in Japan, the hydrangea (*ajisai*) is found in temple gardens, public parks, and private gardens throughout the country. Blooming in the rainy season in June, hydrangeas like damp, shady environments, which is why this garden is planted on a hillside sheltered by dawn redwood trees.