

Kumamoto Suizenji Koen: 水前寺公園

by Graham Bowyer

Introduction

I have been fortunate in acquiring several old postcards and stereo photographic images of the Suizenji garden in Kumamoto. In addition, the Old Japan Picture Library and the Nagasaki University Library have very kindly given permission to publish images from their collections. The pictures date from the 1870s to the 1950s. On a visit to the garden in April 2012, I re-took some of the same views as closely as I was able.

The acquisition of these old images has encouraged me to do some research into the history of the garden. In this article, I will summarise what I have been able to discover and make some observations on the old images and compare them to the garden as it is today. I will also make some speculative suggestions regarding the story behind the garden.

Present day sources of information include the visitor leaflet and many tourist and visitor services and websites. They mostly tell similar stories of the origins of the garden in the 17th century and that the garden re-creates views from the 53 stations of the Tokaidō, the main highway from Kyōto to Edo (now Tōkyō) at the time of the garden's construction.

In 1978, Kitano, Kuroda, Shiota and Kawabata published an article entitled 'A Historical Research of the Suizenji-Jyōjuen Garden' in the journal of the Japanese Institute of Landscape Architecture. Aside from a brief summary in English, the article is in Japanese. Starting from a scanned copy, this has been converted to text using optical character recognition software and then into 'English' using automatic language translation software. With considerable manual intervention and some help from a Japanese friend, it has been possible to extract some

information. However, translation remains a challenge. Somewhat disappointingly there is relatively little information about the garden as much of the history relates to the tea-houses.

The website <http://kokindenjunoma.hinokuni.info> also contains some quite detailed information about the history of the tea-houses and the garden. The historical summary <http://kokindenjunoma.hinokuni.info/800/890> is very similar to that published by Kitano et al. Google translate does a passable job with much of the summary table, though with some notable errors, my favourite being the 'stepping stones' that have been mis-translated as 'swamp fly'.

Mirei Shigemori published detailed plans of the garden and several photographs in his 35 volume encyclopedia 日本の庭園 / Nihon no teien published from 1971-1975. A copy is held in the library of the Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures in Norwich. My thanks go to SISJAC for access to these volumes and use of their facilities.

Garden History

The tea house dates back to 1636. Prior to this time, there was a Buddhist temple located there, called Suizenji, literally the temple by the water. The temple was located in an area of naturally occurring rivers and lakes. The water, coming from the slopes of Mount Aso, is of high quality and very suitable for drinking. Springs within the Suizenji garden feed the lake. When Hosokawa Tadatoshi, the recently appointed daimyō of the Higo domain, wanted to build a tea retreat, this was the perfect location. A new temple was constructed elsewhere to replace the existing one and the Higo clan became the owners of the old temple site. The old temple was converted into a tea house.

The garden was constructed by three generations of Hosokawas, and is said to have been completed in 1671 and named 'Suizenji Jyōjuen. It kept that name until 1925, when the official name was shortened to Suizenji Koen. The garden itself seems to have changed relatively little until 1878. Until this time the historical records are mostly concerned with the construction and maintenance of the buildings on the site. Between 1716 and 1736, there were said to be some small but unspecified garden improvements. In 1768 red pine trees were planted and in 1784 moso bamboo (*Phyllostachys pubescens* or *Phyllostachys edulis*) was planted.

After the Meiji restoration in 1868, the old feudal system was abolished. The daimyō, feudal lords, were given titles and a generous settlement, and their domains were converted to Prefectures. The lands previously owned by the daimyō were handed over to the central government. This included the Suizenji garden, which came into government ownership in 1877.

In 1878, the Izumi Shinto shrine was built in the garden. This enabled the central government to give the land to the shrine. The shrine buildings occupy the land to the north of the lake. Members of the Hosokawa family are enshrined here. I have not found any reference to what was located in this area of the garden prior to the construction of the shrine. In 1879 two stone bridges were built providing convenient access from the garden entrance to the shrine. The bridges replaced stepping stones. These and the shrine buildings are a prominent feature of the garden today.

In 1925, Kumamoto City authorities rented the garden from the shrine and opened it as a public park. This arrangement lasted until 1966, when the shrine took over management of the park.

Also in 1925, a zoo was opened on land adjacent to the garden on the east side. The zoo was moved to another site in 1969, and the land was incorporated into Suizenji park. This area is now a typical 20th century park with grass and trees. It is a pleasant area, but is curiously juxtaposed to the 17th century garden. Fortunately, it is not visible from Suizenji lakeside.

Images of the Tōkaidō

Scenes in the garden are said to represent views seen along the Tōkaidō, the 'east sea road' from Kyōto to Edo, now Tōkyō.

During Edo period, 1600-1868, when Japan was ruled from Edo by the Tokugawa shoguns, the daimyō, the local feudal lords, were required to spend alternate years in residence in Edo. The route for those with domains in Kyushu is depicted in the Shoko Shuseikan Museum in Kagoshima. The route to Kyōto was either overland through Honshū or by boat through the Seto Inland Sea to Ōsaka. It is a short distance from Ōsaka to Kyōto, from where there were two possible routes, the Nakasendō through the mountains, and the Tōkaidō, the coastal road. The museum display says the 1700km journey from Kagoshima to Edo took between 40 and 60 days. Kumamoto, being a little closer, would have taken a few days less.

Making the round trip journey every second year would have given the daimyō and members of his entourage opportunities to become familiar with the major geographic and other features along the road.

The Suizenji visitors guide leaflet says that the garden contained views from the 53 Stations of the Tōkaidō. The stations were government sponsored rest places and

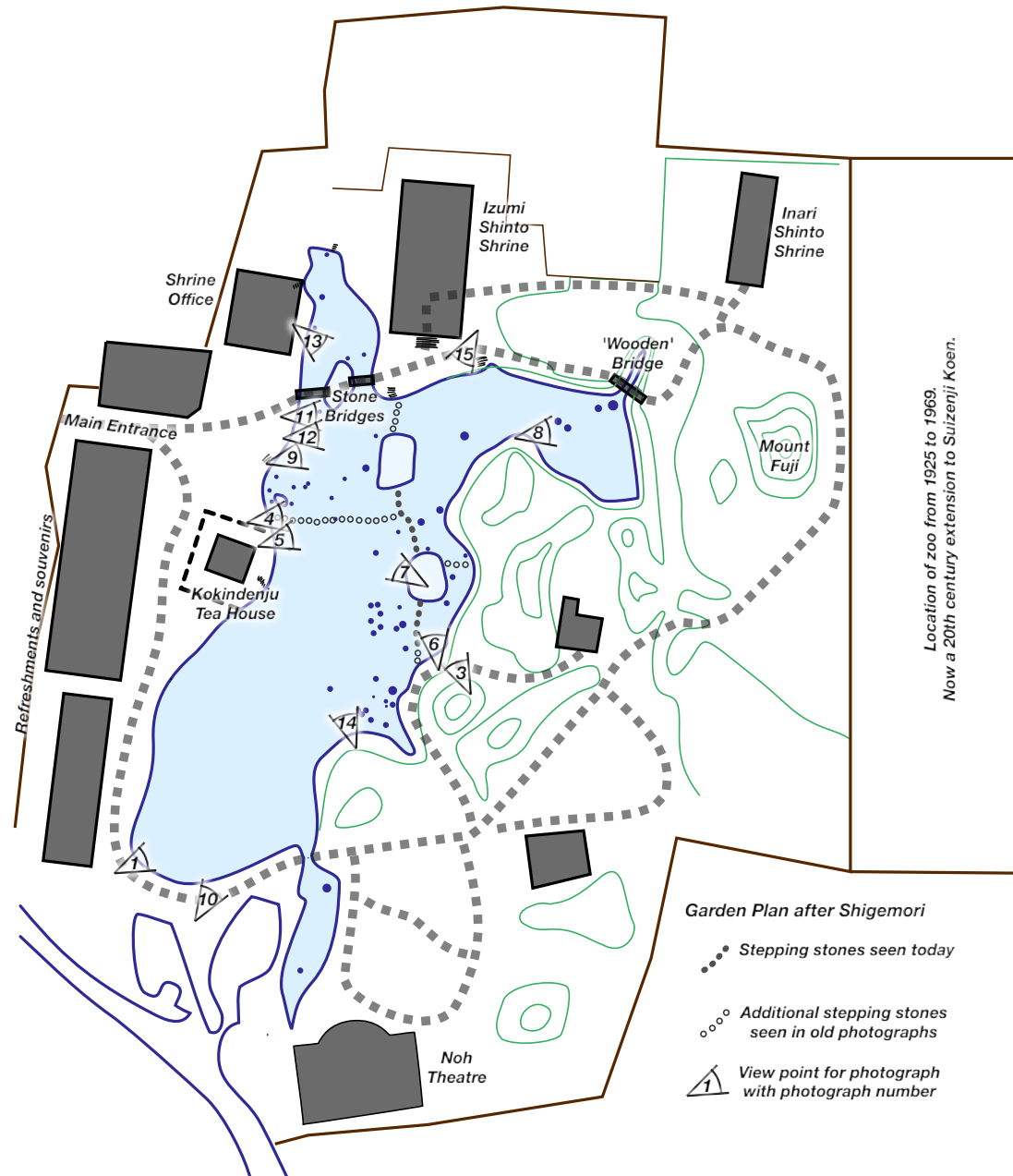


Figure 1: Plan of the garden based on that found in *Nihon no Teien* (Shigemori 1971-1975).

Kumamoto Suizenji Koen.....continued

control points. The 53 stations were famously depicted in Utagawa Hiroshige's woodblock prints, but this was two centuries after the garden was built.

The most instantly recognisable view is that of Mount Fuji, visible across the lake from the main garden entrance. This view, seen from the tea house, is commonly seen in old photographs and those of today.

The second commonly documented view is the lake itself; said to be reminiscent of Lake Biwa. Overlaying outlines of the two lakes shows that there is limited

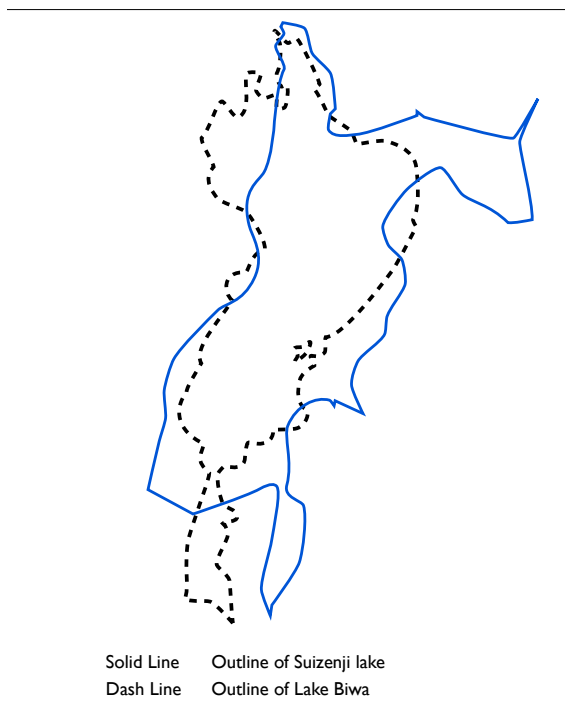


Figure 2: Outlines of Biwa and Suizenji lakes superimposed

similarity [Figure 2]. However, given the lack of accurate surveying technology in 17th century Japan, this should not be surprising. More puzzling is the presence of a large number of islands in Suizenji lake. Biwa is notable for its almost complete lack of islands. The stepping stones connecting the two main islands to the shore on all four sides are also a very prominent visual feature which has no obvious parallel in Biwa. I have no suggestion for what the connection might be between Suizenji and Biwa lakes.

The third image of the Tōkaidō is said to be Nihonbashi, the famous bridge in Edo, that is at one end of the Tōkaidō. Various Western visitors to the garden have reported being told that one of the bridges in the park represents Nihonbashi. Some report it as one of the stone bridges and others report it as the wooden bridge near the Mount Fuji. The stone bridges were not built until 1879, more than two centuries after the completion of the garden, and replaced stepping stones. The 'wooden' bridge crosses a deep ravine and forms part of the mountainous section of the garden. The garden context here seems to be quite inappropriate for Nihonbashi.

I have been unable to find any information on the other views. We found a reference to two sets of 10 favourite views of the garden. This information is dated to late 17th and early 18th century. Despite our initial hopes that this might describe some further views of the Tōkaidō it appears to be a reference to views in Kyūshū. Mount Aso and Kuma water are clearly local references; we believe the others may be as well, though the Japanese text is difficult to translate. We would be delighted if someone could shed some further light on this. The text can be found at: <http://kokindenjunoma.hinokuni.info/800/810/>

Possible Broader Geographic Interpretation

Having failed to find any references to the famous 53 views other than the 3 mentioned above, I thought I would look to the present day garden and see what ideas I could get from it. I was inspired by a correspondent in Kumamoto who wrote to me saying that the garden represents classic views of the Japanese landscape, but didn't mention the Tōkaidō. This made me wonder whether the story about the Tōkaidō is overly specific and perhaps the garden represents views from the journey from Kumamoto to Edo, including the Tōkaidō.

I find it hard to see any similarity between Suizenji Lake and Lake Biwa; what other body of water might it represent? The presence of so many islands, large and small, suggests the Seto Inland Sea. As noted above, travelling the length of the Seto Inland Sea was an option for the journey from Kumamoto to Edo. In the earliest photographs we see that the network of stepping stones was more complete than today. Visitors could cross the lake using a line of stones starting near the tea-house on the west side, perhaps imagining that they are making the journey across the Inland Sea.

The wooden bridge on the way to the Mount Fuji might be interpreted as representing one of the bridges along the Tōkaidō. Hiroshige's prints show bridges at Kagegawa and Okazaki. These are illustrated as wooden bridges similar in style to the 'wooden' bridge in Suizenji garden.

Not far from here is a small Inari shrine with a line of bright red torii gates. Is this intended to remind the visitor of the ancient Fushimi Inari shrine in Kyōto with its many hundreds of red torii gates?

It is hard to imagine that the conical mountain represents anything other than Mount Fuji, despite a



Above - Photo 1: Kumamoto - Satsuma's Garden. 1870s Photographer Tomishige Rihei (Old Japan Picture Library)



Above Right - Photo 2: Kumamoto - (Perhaps Suizenji) 1870s Photographer Tomishige Rihei (Old Japan Picture Library)



Above - Photo 3: Photograph taken between 1893 and 1904i (Nagasaki University Library)



Right - Photo 4: One half of a stereo pair, published by Keystone View Company, no. 14004 Photographed circa 1900

Kumamoto Suizenji Koen....continued

rather non-Fuji-like ridge running from the peak to the northwest. I cannot find any Japanese volcano that has such a feature. The garden builders would surely know that Mount Fuji is almost perfectly circular. Perhaps the ridge was added to provide an easier climb for visitors wishing to make the 'pilgrimage' to the top. Although Japan has many volcanoes, only a few are conical in shape, and along the route from Kumamoto to Edo, Mount Fuji is the only mountain that looks like the one in the garden. The local volcano, Mount Aso is a vast crater resulting from explosive eruptions and collapse. The crater is some 20kms across, so it looks quite unlike Mount Fuji.

Whatever specific views inspired the original garden builders, today we can marvel at their skill in recreating in a few acres the essence of the Japanese landscape.

A Visit to the Garden

Today, the visitor on entering the garden is immediately presented with the marvelous view across the lake to the Mount Fuji, a 17th century interpretation of the Japanese landscape. After taking in the view, we are invited to cross the two stone bridges and take the path along the northern side of the lake, visiting the Izumi Shinto shrine on the way. After crossing the 'wooden' bridge and admiring the skill of the gardeners in maintaining the many clipped shrubs and trees, we follow the path behind the mountains. Here we enter a relatively flat area, mostly covered with grass and trees. Statues of two Hosokawa lords briefly attract our attention. This area, in Western 20th century park style, is curiously appended to the delightful 17th century garden. Proceeding, we eventually emerge from behind the mountains and re-join the lake along the south side. Here we enjoy views along the length of the lake and of the tea house so prominently located on the west side of the lake. Some stop to take tea and enjoy the views a little longer; others pause only

briefly for a photo and then rush on to the next tourist destination.

In the 17th century, our purpose for coming to this site would have been to sample the tea made with excellent local water. The garden was added to provide the perfect surroundings for the enjoyment of the tea, the company of friends and the young ladies of the tea house. Clearly, the garden's best view is from along the west side where the tea house is located.

Early photographs [1, 4, 5, and 8] show people in the landscape, on the stepping stones and on the grassy slopes of the hills and the Mount Fuji. The stepping stones provide access from the west side of the lake, close to the tea house, to the two islands and to each side of the lake. In photograph 3, we also see what appears to be a well trodden path across the islands, suggesting that entering the landscape, such as we see in the pictures, was a common experience for visitors and not something staged purely for the photographer. A correspondent has told me that local residents, alive today, can remember climbing the Mount Fuji when they were children.

It seems that in times past, visitors were able to enter into the landscape and get involved in the landscape, in a way that is not possible today. Today's enjoyment is a more passive walk along the path.

Historic Photographs

The photographs show a number of changes to the garden during the past 100 years:

Some of the earliest images [3, 4, 5, and 6] show that lines of stepping stones were a significant visual feature of the garden, linking the two islands and connecting them to the mainland to the north, east, south and west. There appear to be well trodden paths across the grass islands suggesting that 100 years ago, visitors in some number

walked across the stones to the islands. Two of the images [4 and 5] show several ladies standing on the stones.

The later images show that over the years, some of the stepping stones have been removed, preventing today's visitors from reaching the islands or crossing the lake.

The edges of the islands and the pond are lined with very few stones in the oldest photograph, but today there appear to be many more; possibly some of the stepping stones have been reused to make a more rocky water edge?

Two of the images [5 and 8] show people on the side of Mount Fuji. The images show a faint line across Mount Fuji rising from left to right. Is this a path enabling visitors to climb the mountain. Surely they would have been rewarded with a fine panoramic view of the garden. Today visitors are not invited to climb the mountain.

Mount Fuji is seen in a sequence of images from *circa* 1900 to the present day [4, 5, 8, 11, 12, 17, and 18]. There are two changes to the landscape that have a significant impact on the way I perceive it.

The pictures show that the trees in the distance have become progressively larger over the years. In the 1910s image, the landscape is dominated by the mountain which appears to be several times taller than the line of background trees. Today, when viewed from near the main entrance, the trees in the distance appear to be of similar height to Mount Fuji, which, as a consequence, now appears as a less dominant feature. The larger trees on the boundary of the garden provide an effective screen, hiding from view many of the modern city buildings which are certainly larger than those of 100 years ago. I don't know whether letting the trees grow taller has been a deliberate policy of the garden managers, but it certainly changes the way Mount Fuji is perceived.



Photo 5: One half of a stereo pair, published by Underwood & Underwood, no. (95)-3934 Photographed by British photographer, Herbert G. Ponting in 1903



Photo 6: Postcard with postmark 1909. Publisher unknown.



Photo 7: Postcard published between 1907 and 1918. Publisher unknown.



Photo 8: Postcard published by Hamada Printers & Publishers of Kumamoto City between 1907 and 1918

Kumamoto Suizenji Koen....continued

There is a large pine tree on the northerly of the two large islands [11]. From a viewpoint near the main entrance, this tree is a little less than half way between the viewer and Mount Fuji. In the 1920s' and 1930s' images [11 and 12], this tree towers above the mountain, giving the impression of great distance to the mountain. Since the 1930s, the tree has been replaced. The replacement tree is considerably shorter than its predecessor making the mountain appear less distant [18].

I have included one old picture with an unidentified view. Photo 2 is one of a pair taken by Tomishige Rihei of Kumamoto. It is identified as being in Kumamoto, but not specifically as Suizenji. The photograph shows a carefully crafted interpretation of the Japanese landscape, similar in style to Suizenji. My initial reaction was that this is a view of the north shore before the installation of the Izumi Shrine and the pair of stone bridges, but I cannot make the view fit with what is there now, without rather more re-modelling than would seem to be necessary to incorporate a shrine into the garden. Is it Suizenji north shore or is there / was there another garden in Kumamoto of some scenic merit?



Photo 9: Postcard published between 1907 and 1918. Publisher unknown.



Photo 10: Postcard from 1920s. Publisher unknown.



Photo 11: Postcard probably circa 1920. Publisher unknown.

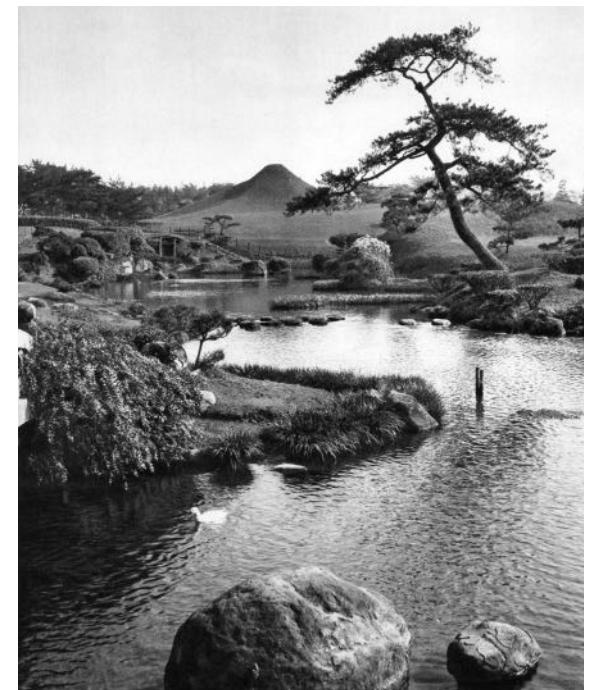


Photo 12: Photograph dated to 1930s. Photographer unknown.



Photo 13: Postcard published circa 1950s. Publisher unknown



Photo 14: Postcard published circa 1950s. Publisher unknown.



Photo 15: Postcard published circa 1950s. Publisher unknown.



Photo 16: Photograph taken by author in 2012. Compares with photograph 6

Kumamoto Suizenji Koen.....continued



Photo 17: Photograph taken by author in 2012. Compares with photograph 11



Photo 18: Photograph taken by author in 2012. Compares with photograph 12

Plant List

Mirei Shigemori's detailed plan of the garden includes many plants with their Japanese names. In the table I have copied those where I can confidently identify the katakana characters and added the romanised version of the name and the translation provided by my dictionary. Note that the convention is to write all plant (and, indeed, animal) names in katakana, regardless of whether the plant has a kanji name.

Shigemori's Annotation	Romanised Version	Dictionary Translation
ムクノキ	mukunoki	Aphananthe oriental elm (<i>Aphananthe aspera</i>), mukutree
ヒサカキ	hisakaki	<i>Hisakaki</i> (<i>Eurya japonica</i>)
サワラ	sawara	Sawara cypress (<i>Chamaecyparis pisifera</i>)
ナギ	nagi	Asian Bayberry (<i>Nageia nagi</i>)
カエデ	kaede	Maple (tree) (<i>Acer</i> spp.)
マユミ	mayumi	Japanese spindle tree (<i>Euonymus</i> <i>Euonymus hamiltonianus</i> subsp. <i>sieboldianus</i>)
マサキ	masaki	Japanese spindle tree (<i>Euonymus japonicus</i>)
ナナメノキ	nanaminoki	Holly (<i>Ilex chinensis</i>)
モクセイ	mokusei	<i>Osmanthus</i> sp
スギ	sugi	Japanese cedar (<i>Cryptomeria japonica</i>)
モクセイ科	mokuseika	Olive (Oleaceae family)
サカキ	sakaki	Sakaki tree (<i>Cleyera japonica</i>)
エノキ	enoki	Japanese hackberry, Chinese nettle tree (<i>Celtis sinensis</i> var. <i>japonica</i>),
ヒノキ	hinoki	Hinoki cypress, Japanese cypress (<i>Chamaecyparis obtusa</i>),
モミ	momi	Momi fir (<i>Abies firma</i>)

Shigemori's Annotation	Romanised Version	Dictionary Translation
アラカシ	arakashi	Ring-cupped oak, Japanese blue oak (<i>Quercus glauca</i>),
ネズミモチ	nezumimochi	Japanese privet (<i>Ligustrum japonicum</i>)
オオムラ	oomura	Omura azalea (<i>Rhododendron pulchrum</i>)
イチョウ	ichou	Ginkgo, ginkgo, maidenhair tree (<i>Ginkgo biloba</i>)
サツキツツジ	satsukitsutsuji	satsuki azalea (<i>Rhododendron indicum</i>)
マサキ	masaki	Japanese spindletree (<i>Euonymus japonicus</i>)
ハゼ	haze	Wax tree, species of sumac (<i>Toxicodendron succedaneum</i> or <i>Rhus succedanea</i>)
クス	kusu	Camphor tree, camphorwood, camphor laurel (<i>Cinnamomum camphora</i>)
イヌツゲ	inutsuge	Japanese holly (<i>Ilex crenata</i>)
マキ	maki	Yew plum pine (<i>Podocarpus macrophyllus</i>)
イヌビワ	inubiwa	Fig (<i>Ficus erecta</i>)
タブノキ	tabunoki	Laurel (<i>Persea thunbergii</i> or <i>Machilus thunbergii</i>)
クロマツ	kuromatsu	Black pine (<i>Pinus thunbergii</i>)
カキ	kaki	Japanese persimmon (<i>Diospyros kaki</i>)
ツバキ	tsubaki	Camellia (<i>Camellia japonica</i>)
サクラ	sakura	Cherry (<i>Prunus</i> spp)
シイ	shii	Japanese Chinquapin (<i>Castanopsis cuspidata</i>)