

Pathway of Weeping Cherry Trees in Kitakata City, Fukushima Prefecture

In Kitakata City, Fukushima Prefecture, there is a pathway of weeping cherry trees, or Shidare-zakura, stretching over 3 kilometers, which was developed on the site of a former railway line. It is one of the largest in the country and ranks high in popularity among cherry blossom spots on websites and other sources¹.

(Text: Morohashi Kumiko)

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Above: The pathway, lined with approximately 1,000 weeping cherry trees (Shidare-zakura), forms an incredible tunnel of cherry blossoms.

Below: Shidare-zakura alongside the steam locomotive that was used on the final journey of the Nicchu Line

Kitakata City in northwestern Fukushima Prefecture in the Tohoku region is home to a weeping cherry tree-lined walking and bicycling path, one of the largest in the country. This is a recreational pathway that has been constructed on the old tracks of the Nicchu Line railway operated by Japan National Railways. Stretching approximately 3 kilometers from the old Kitakata Station, it offers visitors the opportunity to admire about 1,000 Shidare-zakura trees along the route.

The Nicchu Line opened in 1938 and spanned 11.6 kilometers with a total of five stations from Kitakata Station to Atsushio Station, serving as the gateway to Atsushio and Nicchu onsens (hot springs). Steam locomotives operated along this route. However, in 1974, the steam locomotive operation came to an end due to declining passenger numbers. Moreover, in 1984, financial difficulties led to its official discontinuation. Kitakata City then renovated the former railway track, stretching approximately three kilometers from the old Kitakata Station to the adjacent Aizu-Muramatsu Station, into a dedicated pedestrian and bicycle path for the citizens lined with Shidare-zakura trees, and the pathway was opened in 1988.

At first, various cherry blossom varieties, including Somei-yoshino, were considered for planting along the pathway. However, ultimately, the choice of Shidare-zakura was made based on a proposal by the then-mayor, Karahashi Azuma. In Miharuru Town, Fukushima Prefecture, there is a renowned weeping cherry tree known as 'Miharuru Takizakura'². This cherry tree has been familiar to locals since ancient times, as it is depicted in the masterpiece, *Takizakura*, by the prominent Japanese painter from the same prefecture, Oyama Chusaku.

The pathway lined with weeping cherry trees is currently undergoing a project to be extended by volunteer citizens. Karahashi Osamu, chairman of the NPO Nicchu Line Shidare-zakura Project, an organization launched by volunteers in Kitakata City in 2013, shares the following: "The initiative aims to extend the Shidare-zakura pathway all the way to the former terminus of the Nicchu Line, the old Atsushio Station.

An example of weeping cherry blossom trees planted as part of the Nicchu Line Shidare-zakura Project. Mount Iide, capped with snow, is visible in the background



Photo: NPO Nicchu Line Shidare-zakura Project

The goal is to transform the entire 11.6-kilometer former Nicchu Line route into a weeping cherry blossom tree-lined pathway, creating a lasting tourist attraction for future generations."

The Nicchu Line Shidare-zakura Project, established for over a decade, has recently planted an additional 258 weeping cherry blossom trees (as of March 31, 2024). The trees planted by the NPO are in the rural outskirts of Kitakata City. Even in spring, visitors can enjoy the blossoms while admiring the snow-capped Mount Iide³ in the background.

The cherry blossoms along the pathway typically reach full bloom from mid-April. In Kitakata City, the annual Kitakata Cherry Blossom Festival is held during this time. In 2024, the festival will take place from April 5 to 24. "Throughout the popular festival period, visitors can enjoy the Shidare-zakura illumination along the pathway from 6:30PM to 8:00PM," explains Karahashi. "The area where our NPO planted the cherry blossoms is in the outskirts, with enough space between the trees for activities such as cherry blossom viewing with picnic sheets spread out. We encourage you to come and savor the experience!"

A Shidare-zakura pathway stretching 11.6km will surely be a magnificent sight to look forward to. **■**

1. Ranked 1st in a list of must-visit cherry blossom and *hanami* (flower-viewing) spots in Tohoku 2024 by Walkerplus (KADOKAWA Corporation).
2. This weeping cherry tree is estimated to be over 1,000 years old. In 1922, it became the first cherry tree to be designated as a Natural Monument by the government.
3. The main peak of the Iide Mountain Range, spanning Fukushima, Yamagata, and Niigata Prefectures, with an elevation of 2,105 meters.



Shidare-zakura trees are illuminated as part of the Kitakata Cherry Blossom Festival

Photo: PIXTA