One Million Tulips

Tanto Tulip Festival continues its run near Kinosaki Onsen

When people think about Japan's flowers, sakura (cherry blossoms) or maybe even *ajisai* (hydrangeas) come to mind. Despite this, Tanto, a countryside area near Kinosaki Onsen, **hosts a unique festival every year with a display of approximately one million planted tulips**.

The festival first started in 1992, when Tanto had a population of only around 6,000 people. The town took inspiration from the outdoor education of Yoshio Toui, a famous Tanto-born educator in Japan, and organized a festival that could offer this kind of learning experience to adults and children alike. Only locals attended the festival's first year; but, due to the event's and town's subsequent growth, **now people come to see the flowers from all over Japan — and even the world**!

The town orders tulips from the Netherlands, which take about a month to arrive by ship. Dutch manufacturers often crossbreed to create new types of tulips, so there are new breeds present every year! Of the 1,000+ breeds of tulips seen throughout Japan, **about 300 varieties can be seen at the Tanto Tulip Festival**. The tulips are planted at the end of October, where they grow particularly well in temperate climates before sprouting in the beginning of April. Tulip flower buds are not harmed by snow, sleet, or overnight low temperatures, as they are accustomed to climates like in their native land of the Netherlands, which is famous for its tulips. The Netherlands' Keukenhof Tulip Gardens inspired the layout for this local Japanese festival. The Tanto Tulip Festival, organized and held by the Tanto Tulip Festival Action Committee, begins sometime in mid-April.

Every year, visitors can look forward to **a section of tulips forming a popular image**. This image is made with 100,000 tulips and carefully chosen by the Tanto Tulip Festival Action Committee about a year in advance, matching the image with an important or significant aspect of that given year. In past years, there has been a *kounotori* (Toyooka's symbolic Oriental White Stork), a *daruma* (a Japanese traditional doll), and even famous anime characters like Hello Kitty and Astro Boy. This year, as we are still fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, the committee decided to design a field depicting *Amabie*, a legendary Japanese mermaid with a beak-like mouth and three tailfins, who allegedly prophesies an epidemic and instructs people to make copies of its likeness to defend against illness. This creature has become popular only recently to support combating the novel coronavirus. Despite the visitor count being small this year due to the pandemic, the tulips bloom just the same.

The work that goes into designing these fields is nothing short of spectacular. A committee member named Watanabe first creates the designs on a computer using image editing software such as GIMP. When making the images, Watanabe must consider how the design will be warped when looked at from an angle instead of directly overhead. This is because there is a platform on which visitors can stand to look at the field.

Tulip designs from 2012 and 1996 of a *daruma* and a *kounotori*, respectively.

The festival is home to many interesting crossbreeds, including one called Ice Cream.

It takes about 10 years to breed a new type of tulip, but the hybrids result in fascinating shapes with interesting names. Some tulips in this year's festival include Drumline, Ice Cream, and even Disneyland Paris! After the festival is over, the farmlands offer an activity for people to dig up tulips and take them home so that they do not go to waste.

Tanto hosts this festival to **raise awareness of nature**. While at the festival, visitors can see not only the tulips, but also the nearby forest, mountains, and fields. As expressed by Kazunori Shimokura, the head of the committee, "we live in a digital age where people think that their smartphones can offer an answer to any inquiry, but truly feeling something from the heart and being physically present in nature is something priceless that you can only obtain by going to events like this."

Kinosaki Onsen is a town of time-honored hot springs dating back 1300 years ago. It is home to seven public bathhouses, all located within walking distance of each other and the train station. Guests are encouraged to wear yukata and geta, stroll through the town, and go onsen-hopping.

Toyooka is a downtown area home to the Oriental White Stork, a bird that was revived from extinction in this very town. The city's efforts restored the Oriental White Stork population, and now over 200 fly the skies of Japan. Toyooka is also known for the Genbudo Caves.

Izushi is the resident castle town, popular for its nostalgic atmosphere of Edo-era Japan. It is home to many interesting attractions such as castle ruins, a samurai house, a kabuki theater, and a clock tower. The town's specialty is Izushi Sara Soba, buckwheat noodles served in small portions on small plates.

Kannabe is a mountainous area with fun activities year-round. In the winter, one can go skiing, snowboarding, snowshoeing, and sledding. In the warm months, one can go camping, paragliding, fishing, tree climbing, and more. Kannabe is the perfect destination for adventurers.

Takeno is a quaint fisherman town that is a hidden gem among the northern coast of Hyogo Prefecture. The beach has clear, blue waters while the mountains surrounding it offer great hiking opportunities. It is encouraged to stroll through the peaceful town, where one can find small shops and traditional landscapes.

Tanto is a quiet countryside town with magnificent nature—including a giant field of tulips in the spring and brilliant red-leaved trees in the fall.