

## The Greatest Azalea Park in the World: Tsutsuji-ga-oka Park, Tatebayashi, Gunma

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Tsutsuji-ga-oka Park in Tatebayashi City, Gunma Prefecture, is an important and unique azalea park in terms of its history and traditional preservation of old azaleas. The successive lords of Tatebayashi castle, the 7th Lord, Yasumasa Sakakibara, the 9th Lord, Tadatsugu Matsudaira, the 12th Lord, Tsunayoshi Tokugawa, and up until the present administrator have planted additional azaleas in the native wild azalea habitat here and permanently maintained this park.

About 1200 unpruned plants, which are over 100 years old, of *Rhododendron kaempferi*, *R. transiens*, *R. xobtusum*, and others are growing in this park. The oldest azalea is over 800 years and 5 m in height and 9 m in width. Local personages in Meiji and Taisho Era also planted valuable cultivars Edo-Kirishima bred in the Edo period. These old shrubs are a valuable genetic resource because of the accumulated flower mutations and other characters. At the end of April the park is in full bloom with azalea flowers which make this park into a crimson world and we have the wonderful spectacle of azaleas from the Edo Period to the present time.

The azaleas in Tsutsuji-ga-oka Park are a world cultural heritage and a symbol of traditional floriculture in Japan.

The research station in this park has an azalea breeding program using native taxa and recently produced the following two new azalea cultivars.

- 1) Hanayama series No. 1: A flower color mutant of *R. kaempferi* having single opera-pink flowers containing a white center; a medium to small shrub.
- 2) Hanayama series No. 2: A flower color mutant of *R. transiens* with fuchsia-pink and purplish blotches, middle-early flowering, medium-large single flowers.