



Japan's Autumn Majesty: Gardens, Colors, and Cultural Treasures **November 2-13, 2025**

Q&A with AHS Host Holly Shimizu

This AHS program takes place in autumn, a truly majestic time in Japan. How does the fall season in Japan influence the design, appearance, and care of its gardens, and what seasonal elements are emphasized during this time?

Autumn in Japan is a time of many festivals to celebrate the vivid reds, purples, oranges, greens, and golds of the maple leaves. The Japanese use the special word Momijigari which refers to "going leaf-peeping." Fall is the time when families hike in nature to enjoy the vibrant colors.

The harvest moon is a special time for people to gather in parks and temples and is considered the most beautiful lunar experience of the year. Viewing the moon is a time to show appreciation for the harvest, express gratitude, and pray for continued good fortune.

For those AHS travelers who may be new to Japanese horticulture, what are some key takeaways or experiences you hope they will leave with from this program?

The majority of plants that are cultivated in Japan are native to Japan. Their gardens are inspired by their surrounding nature in a miniaturized and idealized formation. In order to manage their plants, which are grown in small spaces, the plants are pruned frequently, generally at least once a year. Pruning is done to mimic the plants and scenes that grow in nature. Examples are wind-blown pines, undulating hills, moss-covered boulders, and creating distant views.

Our AHS group will enjoy a great variety of gardens and cultural experiences on this program, including the special annual Chrysanthemum Exhibition. What is the cultural significance of the chrysanthemum in Japan?

Chrysanthemums, referred to as Kiku in Japan, are a symbol of the emperor and the imperial family. Since ancient times, chrysanthemum festivals have been held throughout Japan. They symbolize purity and the eternal cycle of life.

Originally from China, the flowers were once used as a culinary herb that could be eaten raw or brewed into a tea. It was believed these flowers would extend one's life. The cultivation and

training of Chrysanthemums is an intense job. They require meticulous detailed work and must be done by highly skilled gardeners and horticulturists.

Can you walk us through a particular program highlight, such as a specific garden or cultural experience, that you're especially looking forward to sharing with our AHS group on this program?

I am excited that we are going to the Nomura Samurai House & Garden. It is a masterfully designed space that was the former home of a high-ranking samurai. The courtyard garden includes incredible stonework, beautiful lanterns, a meandering stream and an excellent viewing platform. This small, enclosed space gives a feeling of being well-protected in a world of tranquility.

Some of the workshops will be challenging as well as interesting. We can try our hand at creative Japanese arts such as the Ikebana (Japanese flower arranging) which is an experience in Japanese design.

What makes the Shunkaen Bonsai Museum such an important place for bonsai lovers, and what can AHS travelers look forward to learning there?

Bonsai Master Kunio Kobayashi has created an inspiring museum made up of a large collection of bonsai, including a 1000-year-old pine tree, that are arranged thoughtfully throughout this lovely garden. We will learn about the art of growing and training bonsai. In the museum, we can enjoy the collection of antique pots, books, and stones.

AHS travelers will get to experience a special kaiseki meal, a traditional multi-course Japanese dinner that emphasizes presentation and balance in both taste and aesthetics. How do local ingredients and seasonality factor into the creation of a kaiseki meal and reflect Japan's horticultural heritage?

Autumn is considered the season of heart appetites. Typical fall foods include mushrooms, sweet potatoes, persimmons, and chestnuts. Kaiseki meals are considered one of the finest meals in the world. They are traditionally made up of six to nine courses. The chefs use fresh, local, seasonal ingredients and are all prepared with different skills and techniques. The food will be served with artful presentation and timing; one can expect something pickled, vinegared, steamed, grilled, boiled, deep fried, and more. Initially, kaiseki meals were served as part of the tea ceremony hospitality, to satisfy hunger and to enhance the enjoyment of the tea. Japanese tea can be strong, so for some people it's helpful for it to be accompanied by food.

This AHS travel program visits iconic locations such as Kenroku-en Garden and Daitokuji Temple. Are there specific aspects of these sites that you find particularly inspiring from a horticultural perspective?

Kenroku-en is a fine example of a stroll garden. As you walk through the garden, you may feel a sense of serenity as you observe unique plants, pleasant surprises, ancient pine trees and vibrant leaf colors seen only in autumn. It is said the Kenroku-en garden possesses the six most important characteristics of a Japanese Garden: spaciousness, seclusion, artifice, antiquity, water, and magnificent views.

Daitokuji Temple has a variety of stunning Zen gardens, dry landscape gardens, lovely architecture, and a famous controversial garden designed by the renowned garden designer Shigemori Mirei.

What makes the onsen experience at Utsukushigahara Onsen Shoho unique, and how does the integration of the natural surroundings enhance the therapeutic benefits of the hot springs?

This onsen, or hot spring, experience is greatly enhanced by the breathtaking views of the Japanese Alps with spectacular fall color. It provides an unforgettable, immersive experience while enjoying the benefits of soaking in high quality hot spring water.

How do different regions of Japan influence the styles and plants used in garden designs, especially at locations like Kyoto and Kanazawa?

Most gardens of Japan are imitations of their surrounding nature. Several factors such as geography, climate, centuries of history, culture, and the different periods of governance are major influences. Gardens in Kyoto were initially heavily influenced by Chinese culture and design, incorporating ponds, hills, islands, arched bridges, and rocks. Zen Buddhism focused more on simplicity, mindfulness, and the ephemeral nature of life. Zen gardens evoke a sense of peace and tranquility that for some can become a meditation aid. During the time Japan was isolated from the world, 1603-1868, Japanese gardens and arts began to evolve and develop their own style. Many gardens became more decorative stroll gardens as the ruling class sought to create more elaborate spaces. By 1868, when Japan reopened their art and gardens to the world, it had developed into what we now know as Japanese identity.