The months of the Japanese calendar

At first glance the months of today's Japanese calendar appear to have rather dull names. January is 一月. Ichigatsu, the character for 'one' followed by 'month' also meaning 'moon', and this is the pattern through to December, 十二月 Jūnigatsu, 'twelve month'. As far as names go this is highly practical but has little romance.

Looking at the roots of English month names, things seem a little more interesting. 'January' originally comes from the Latin for the month of Janus, the ancient Italian deity who was the guardian of doorways, gates and beginnings. Some later months are named after other deities and emperors. In fact, a third of the Latin month names on which the modern English names are based show that ancient Romans too were just counting the months. December is Latin for 'the tenth month'; its current place as the twelfth month reminds us that the old Roman calendar was rearranged and refined several

Take another look at a Japanese calendar and you will

often see that each month has another Japanese name. Many calendars note these older traditional names together with the standard ones and their meanings are much more interesting.

Did you spend December busily trying to get things done? In Japan, priests too are running around at that time of year. Let's explain.



New Year decorative lanterns saying 'Geishun' or 'welcome to the spring' now mean 'welcome to the new year' and hint that Japan's new year was not always. held at the same time it is today.

These month names are the lunar months' names and they still appear on modern calendars alongside their practical counterparts. Below are the most common meanings of these names.











June is called Minazuki. The middle character tells us it is the month of no





July is called Fumizuki or Fuzuki. This has two common meanings: the month when the ears of rice swell or the month to write poetry.





September is called Nagatsuki and here the character for long is referring to long nights.

October is called Kannazuki and this means the godless month. While the name sounds rather ominous, legend has it that this is the month when all over Japan gods leave their homes to gather and discuss business at Izumo Taisha, the Izumo Grand Shrine in Shimane Prefecture.



In Izumo, the same month is known as Kamiarizuki, 神在月, the month with gods.



November is called Shimotsuki, the month of frost.



The Japanese Calendar

The year 2011 is Heisei 23 (平成23年), the 23rd year of the Heisei 'Achieving Peace' Era.

Japan has used the current Gregorian calendar since 1873 when it was adopted by the Meiji Government as part of its westernisation of Japan.

The first calendar came to Japan from China via Korea in 604CE. This was a type of lunisolar calendar. As it was based on the moon's orbit of the earth which is about 29.5 days, months were made to be short (29 days) or long (30 days). An extra month was also inserted every few years to take into account the earth's orbit around the sun. Each year the calendar was decided by the emperor and later in the Edo Period (1600-1867) by the shogun. Several refinements were made to the calendar during the Edo Period as astronomy advanced.

It was important to know if it was a long or short month as merchants wanted accounts settled by the end of the month. With the development of printing during the Edo Period, calendars moved from being the preserve of the nobility. There were calendars designed to be posted on street poles and merchants produced calendars to give to customers as happens today.

Japan's parliamentary library, the National Diet Library, has an interesting online explanation of the history of calendars in Japan and you can view selected calendars from their collection. The section *Unriddling the Daisho-reki*

calendar challenges you to decode actual examples of old pictorial calendars which were used during the Edo Period to help people remember which were the long months and which were the short ones for a given year. Try them for yourself at www.ndl.go.jp/koyomi/e/.

Reading about Japanese history and art, dates can be puzzling, and it is useful to learn key era names, known as nengō, which coincide with imperial reigns. These names are a type of official 'slogan' usually with a good meaning. It used to be possible to have several nengō within an imperial reign, but since the Meiji period there can only be one *nengō*. Heisei is the current *nengō*.

The nengō system is still used extensively in official documents. If you live in Japan it's essential you know your date of birth using both ways of giving the year. And of course don't forget that in Japanese the year comes first, then the month and the day.

And it's the year of the rabbit!

Finally, in Japan the Chinese zodiac year is also used, but instead of waiting for the Chinese (lunar) new year which can be as late as mid-February, the animal of the year appears on Japanese New Year cards and as decorations around the end and start of the calendar year. In 2011, we are in the year of the rabbit.

MAIN REFERENCES: An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Japan Vols1 & 2 Kodansha, Tokyo, 1993 The Japanese Calendar National Diet Library www.ndl.qo.jp/koyomi/e/ Accessed 6 January 2011