

Seasons in Japan—four and counting

Experiencing the different seasons of Japan can be one of the great pleasures of travelling there. Living in Japan, foreigners might at first be a little surprised by just how many people ask, *Shiki wa arimasu ka*—Do you have four seasons in your country? After spending longer in Japan, the reason becomes clear. Even today, people enjoy the changes that the passage of the seasons brings. The word *shiki* 四季 consists of the very characters for ‘four’ 四 followed by ‘season’ 季, but the centuries old appreciation of nature as it progresses through the year becomes even more apparent when you learn that traditionally there are 72 micro-seasons.

72 micro-seasons

29 July to 2 August: *Earth is damp, air is humid*

At the height of summer, this is certainly an accurate description of the climate. *Earth is damp, air is humid* is one of the three *kō* that make up the *sekki* period known as *Taisho* or Greater Heat (23 July-7 August). *Taisho* would be

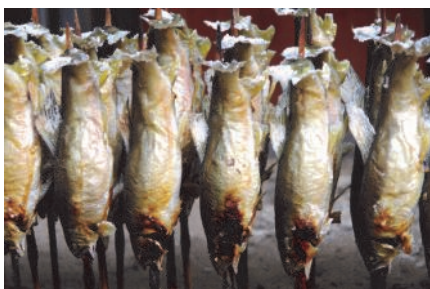


Spring is a favourite time for Australians to visit Japan and it wouldn't be the same without cherry blossoms. They bring beauty to riverbanks, city streets and parks such as this one in central Tokyo.

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Autumn is a great time for food lovers in Japan with many foods considered to be at their best. Ayu fish are a particular delicacy of the season. Of course, Japanese cuisine is a great reason to travel there all year round.

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a familiar term to Japanese people and students of the language, however, the names of *Taisho*'s three *kō* are not widely known.

Centuries ago, Japan adopted a solar Chinese calendar which divided a year into 24 parts, known as *sekki*. Each of these was then divided into three smaller divisions to give the 72 divisions known as *kō*. Each *kō* lasts for only around 5 days.

The dates of this ‘natural’ calendar vary depending on the year by a day either way and of course the climate varies. Having come from the China, this calendar and the names did not accurately reflect local conditions, and in 1684/5, the names were re-written by the first official astronomer of the Edo Period, Shunkai Shibukawa. After the Meiji Restoration the *kō* were further adjusted.

While they may be little known today, reading through all 72 micro-seasons gives an insight into how Japanese have traditionally observed their natural environment.

The traditional start to this yearly cycle is *Risshun* or the Beginning of Spring (4-18 February) and it ends with *Daikan*,

Read all 72 micro-seasons

You can read all 72 micro-seasons in Japanese and English in an article by Nippon.com. There are even different ways of reading the Japanese *kō* names, which consist of three or four kanji characters, so translations into English aren't fixed. The English *kō* names used in this article were taken from this site: www.nippon.com/en/features/h00124/ [Accessed 16/10/2015]

Nippon.com regularly posts interesting articles covering Japanese politics, economy, ‘sci-tech’, society, culture and daily life in an ad-free environment. The site has content in eight languages, with articles first written in either English or Japanese.

the Greater Cold (20 January-3 February). As you progress through the year according to the micro-seasons, ‘fish emerge from the ice’ (14-18 February), the ‘first peach blossoms’ (11-15 March), ‘frogs start singing’ (5-9 May), ‘plums turn yellow’ (16-20 June), ‘cotton flowers bloom’ (23-27 August), ‘crickets chirp around the door’ (18-23 October), ‘rainbows hide’ (22-26 November) and after winter begins,



Summer is hot and humid but it has its own pleasures. Partly to escape the heat, festivals are often held in the evening. Several are famous for spectacular fireworks which look beautiful over water, here at Miyajima.

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Winter—well, this is no longer a secret. For many years now, Australian skiers have been enjoying the great snow of northern Japan (here Nagano). The powder snow is considered among the world's best.

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‘salmon gather and swim upstream’ (17-21 December).

As you feel your energy draining at the end of the Lesser Heat *sekki*, aware that the Greater Heat is still to follow, perhaps that heat might be a little easier to bear if you thought, ‘Now's the time when hawks learn to fly’ (17-22 July).

The sky's moods, winds, crops, flowers, birds and insects frequently occur in the names of Japan's micro-seasons. Now, how would Sydney's micro-seasons look?

Japan's diverse climate

Japan is more than 20 times smaller than Australia, but it would be a mistake to think that the weather is much the same as Tokyo's wherever you are in the country.

Japan's climate is very diverse. The country is a long archipelago stretching from Hokkaido in the north, where the average temperature is only 8 degrees, to the semi-tropical islands of Okinawa in the south, where the average temperature is 22 degrees. The four seasons will differ depending on what part of Japan you are in. A typical winter in Hokkaido and Okinawa are literally miles apart.