

Seasons and Customs: Fireworks Festivals



Sumida River Fireworks Festival, Sumida & Taito Wards (Tokyo), July 26

In 1733, Tokugawa Yoshimune, the eighth shogun of the Edo Period (1603–1867), decreed that a water-god festival, *suijinsai*, “be held on the Sumida River every year on July 9 to mourn those who had died in famine and other disasters. Fireworks were launched at the event, and that event is now recognized as the start of the Sumida River Fireworks Festival, Japan’s most famous fireworks festival, which boasts a history of almost 300 years.

In the beginning, the Kagiya guild of fireworks makers was in charge of the rockets, but in 1810, some members of the group broke away to form the Tamaya guild and the two guilds entered into competition with each other; their rivalry is widely believed to have spurred the unique development of Japanese fireworks. From 1961, due to traffic congestion and worsening pollution of the river, the festivities were discontinued for 17 years, but there was a strong desire among local residents to bring back the fireworks. In 1978 the launch site was moved upstream, and the festival was revived under its modern name, the Sumida River Fireworks Festival. The event attracts over a million spectators every year, and, as it is held on the last Saturday of July, it makes people feel right at the heart of summer!

Japan has four distinct seasons, and the pride of each one is the wide variety of flowers (*bana*) that bloom at the respective times of year. The Japanese love these seasons and especially the changes from one season into another, and they take great pleasure not only in the flowers themselves, but also the beautiful depiction of the flowers in many of the arts and crafts. To the Japanese, even fireworks appear to them as beautiful flowers and the word for fireworks in Japanese, *hanabi* means “flowers of fire.”

The Japanese know that summer has truly arrived when they see a succession of “fire-flowers” open their petals in the night sky, in a similar way to their floral namesakes. If you happen to hear a distant booming sound in summer in Japan, look up to the night sky. A magnificent bouquet of fire-flowers will surely be welcoming you to the Japanese summer!



Festival of Fire (Honō no Saiten), Toyohashi (Aichi), September 13

At most fireworks festivals, the fireworks are launched from mortar tubes on the ground, but the fireworks at this event are very different. These fireworks are from the eastern part of Aichi Prefecture and are known as *tezutsu hanabi*. They are said to have originated from the beacon fires of the Sengoku period (1467–1568).

To make these fireworks, gunpowder is packed into bamboo tubes that are up to a meter in length. The tubes are then hand-held, and the fuse is lit by a man who holds the tube aloft and stands calmly as the *tezutsu hanabi* spouts a roaring column of fire. The sight of such bravery is tremendously impressive! The flames project up to 10 meters from the mouth of the tube, and the spectacle ends with a loud “crack” as the bamboo tube splits apart. At the Honō no Saiten festival, you can enjoy not only the impressive sight of a long row of men launching their *tezutsu hanabi* simultaneously, but also starmines, set-piece fireworks (*shikake hanabi*) and many other kinds of fireworks.

Seasonal Attraction: Fireworks

Fireworks seen in Japanese fireworks displays can be categorized into four types according to their construction: *warimono*, *han warimono*, *katamono*, and *shikake hanabi*. *Warimono* is a typical Japanese fireworks. When the casing breaks, the pyrotechnic pellets (stars) packed inside scatter to form a sphere. With *han warimono*, on the other hand, the stars packed inside the shell fall downward when the shell splits in two in the air. *Katamono* fireworks form letters or a variety of patterns in the night sky. There are many kind of *shikake hanabi*. For example, they can be constructed with the help of wooden frames and wire or launched from over the water. The crowds at fireworks festivals are always delighted by the dynamic patterns and pictures they form.

Warimono



Chrysanthemum

This typical *warimono* forms a round flower shaped like a chrysanthemum in the night sky. Long plumes spread out from the center while maintaining the spherical shape in every direction.



Peony

Chrysanthemum and peony are the two most typical *warimono*. Stars packed inside the casing emit flames that flare straight out without leaving a trail, and the core being a distinctive feature. Usually, two or three colors are layered so that the changing shades of the core and petals can be enjoyed.

Han warimono



A Thousand Chrysanthemums

When the shell splits in the air, there is a momentary delay before variously colored chrysanthemum-shaped stars burst open in unison, filling the night sky with color. This kind of fireworks first appeared in the mid-Taisho era (late 1910s) in single colors.



Flower Thunder

This is one of a type of fireworks known as *otomono*, which produces a very loud bang, and emits a strong light studded with sparks. Sports festivals in Japan are customarily announced by the flare and accompanying loud, thundering boom of *otomono* fireworks.

Katamono



Butterfly

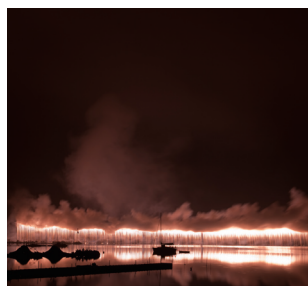
The stars in the shell are distributed in such a way as to form the shape of a butterfly. Since it opens out in three dimensions, it looks like a butterfly from some angles, but from other angles it appears to be round fireworks opening out.



Heart

A typical heart shape. Technical advances from the early Meiji period on have made it possible to create *katamono* with many variations and complex shapes.

Shikake Hanabi



Waterfall

A picture of a waterfall is evoked by using wire to suspend narrow tubes packed with pyrotechnic pellets at regular intervals and igniting them all at once. Generally called Niagara, this *shikake hanabi* is a popular set piece at fireworks displays.



Water Fireworks

Often featured in fireworks displays held near water, various methods are used to set off the fireworks. For example, *warimono* can be launched from in the water to create a fan-shaped flower blooming over the surface, or a launch pad for the fireworks can be set up over the water.



**Toronagashi and Fireworks Festival,
Tsuruga, Fukui Prefecture
August 16**

In an extension of traditional summer *obon* rituals, this festival started in 1950 as a way to give solace to the souls of those who had lost their lives in World War II. A sutra is chanted as around 6,000 paper lanterns float out to sea, with the largest fireworks display on the Sea of Japan coastline. The sea and the night sky look mysterious and otherworldly as they are illuminated by the lanterns and fireworks.



**Omagari National Fireworks Competition,
Daisen, Akita Prefecture
August 23**

The Omagari Fireworks began in 1910 with a hiatus during the war years. This event has had a long history and will take place for the 88th time in 2014. The festival also looks to the future, and the yearly unveiling of new and innovative fireworks also attracts much attention.



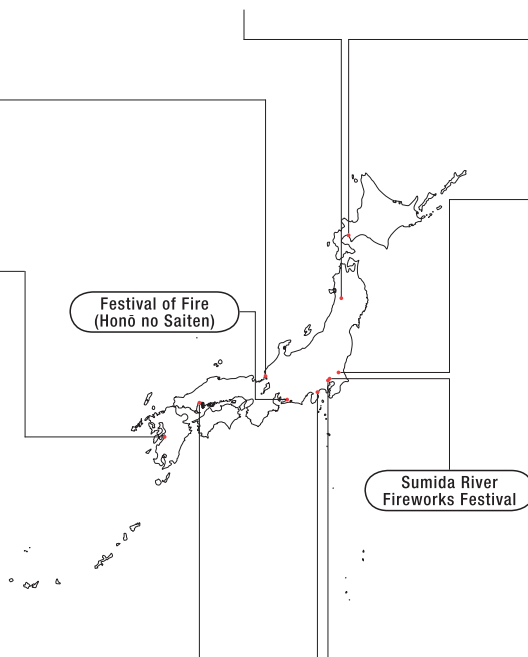
**Lake Toya Long-Run Fireworks Display,
Abutagun, Hokkaido Prefecture
April 28–October 31**

For the enjoyment of visitors to hot-spring (onsen) towns on the shores of Lake Toya, fireworks light up the sky above the lake for 20 minutes each evening. The fireworks displays are repeated from spring to autumn, and can even be enjoyed while one is taking a relaxing hot springs bath at a hotel.



**Yatsushiro National Fireworks Festival,
Yatsushiro, Kumamoto Prefecture
October 18**

There are a number of events across the country that gather together Japan's fireworks specialists in competition, but this is the most significant such occasion in Kyushu. Spectators come from all over the country to see the latest and the best creations of the participating pyrotechnicians.



**Tsuchiura All Japan Fireworks Competition,
Tsuchiura, Ibaraki Prefecture
October 4**

Kimoto Baiho, the head priest of Jinryuji Temple, who had close ties with the local flying corps, established this festival in 1925 with two goals. He wanted to give repose to the souls of those who had died in aerial combat and boost the local economy. The event was created on the banks of Lake Kasumigaura from private donations and has by now become one of the three largest fireworks displays in Japan, drawing attention from all over the country.



**Miyajima Marine Fireworks Display,
Hatsukaichi, Hiroshima Prefecture
August 11**

As a world heritage site, Miyajima enjoys great popularity with many visitors to Japan from overseas. At full tide, the area from the bright red *torii* gate to the inner sanctuary of the Itsukushima Shrine becomes submerged by the rising ocean. In the momentary flash of exploding fireworks, the shrine and the *torii* gate rise from the darkness and are reflected for an instant on the surface of the water like a fantastic illusion.



**Atami Sea Fireworks Festival,
Atami, Shizuoka Prefecture
July 21, 26; August 5, 8, 17, 20, 29;
September 15; December 7, 14, 23**

Atami is located less than an hour by bullet train from Tokyo. The convenient location and the opportunity to enjoy both hot springs and fireworks combine to make Atami a popular resort town. The finale of the fireworks displays is Daikuchu Niagara, which takes its name from the Niagara Falls. It is a huge fireworks display that cascades from the sky like the famous waterfall, lighting up the festival site as brightly as if it were daytime.



**Tokyo Bay Grand Fireworks Festival,
Chuo Ward, Tokyo
August 10**

This festival has many highlights, from the chance to watch fireworks against the backdrop of the famous Rainbow Bridge and the Tokyo evening skyline to the hundred or so large-scale fireworks and others that burst in the shape of various flowers or other unique and artistic patterns. The wide choice of viewing spots, including from rooftops or boats, all adds to the enjoyment. With advance reservations, the fireworks can be seen from really close up.