A Moss Girl's Guide to Japanese Moss Viewing

Searching for microscopic wonders in gardens, forests and even asphalt cracks

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(Top photo: The author, 'moss girl', taking a picture of mosses. Photo by Arisa Yoshida. All other photos by Hisako Fujii, if not otherwise specified.)

For as long as Japan has existed, the country has made a practice, and an art form, of modeling the grandeur of nature on miniature scales. From the luminaries of the Heian court to today's suburban homeowners, Japanese society enjoys a long tradition of patiently imitating expansive landscapes and bringing them closer to hand, allowing people to gaze lovingly at tranquil scenes from a meditative distance. Even today, visitors to Japanese temples and gardens will find small man-made ponds, bonsai trees, dry landscape gardens known as "karesansui," and – perhaps most interestingly – moss gardens.

For centuries, moss was seen as merely a decorative supplement to the craft of Japanese bonsai and landscape gardening.Today, however, it has increasingly become a subject of intense enthusiasm in its own right, with a growing number of "moss viewers" setting out with cameras and magnifying glasses to discover the wonders it has to share.

A growing number of young Japanese women are taking up moss-viewing

But why hide behind a flowery history? I'm one of those people.

Since I first discovered moss ten years ago, the joys of examining moss in its natural habitat and marveling at the sporey, crazy geometries on the other end of my magnifying glass has become one of my greatest pleasures in my life. And I'm not alone: a growing number of young Japanese women have taken up moss-viewing, calling themselves "moss girls" and holding moss viewing parties all over Japan. More recently, the trend has spread to people of all ages and sexes, who are discovering new venues all over the country where moss enthusiasts can gather to share their passion.

By day, I work as a writer and editor of publications on food culture, but for the last few years moss viewing – or, more dramatically, "moss excursions" – has been one of my favorite hobbies. I spend weekdays wandering my neighborhood in search of new moss formations, and on my days off you can find me in the nearby mountains or nature preserves, seeing what happens to moss when it is allowed grow outside human habitats. On long holidays, I'll even travel far from home, to discover new species of moss I've never seen before.

To share my passion with others, and to help connect moss lovers all over the world, I publish the *Kawaii Koke Blog* (meaning 'cute moss blog' in Japanese). On top of that, in 2011, I published the book *Koke wa Tomodachi* ('Mosses, My Dear Friends' in English) in collaboration with moss researcher Hiroyuki Akiyama.

How the glistening moss in an ancient forest stole my heart

But why am I so in love with moss? Our "first date," so to speak, happened ten years ago, when I took a vacation to Yakushima Island in Kagoshima.

Registered in 1993 as Japan's first world natural heritage site, Yakushima forest is best known for the giant, 1,000-year-old cedar trees (yakusugi) that surround its visitors from all sides. The "Jōmon-sugi," a giant cedar named after one of the earliest periods of Japanese history, is arguably the forest's most famous attraction – so famous, in fact, that a lot of people travel to Yakushima just to see it.

Truth be told, even my journey to Yakushima was inspired by this kind of "big nature" outlook. But as soon as I stepped into the forest my senses were overwhelmed by the wet moss that shimmered over every surface. Like an undisturbed treasure from another era, the moss seemed to be everywhere at once. It had completely covered the trees, the boulders, and even the ground, wrapping the entire forest in its luminous green fur.

My tour guide for the trip happened to be very knowledgeable about moss, and he shared a lot of information that helped strengthen the moss' hold on me. This guide was the first person to teach me how to examine the details of moss formations with a magnifying glass, and before long I was poring over every cluster, completely losing interest in the trees themselves. This, you might say, was the beginning of my love affair with moss.

Another major turning point came four years later, when I was able to visit Yatsugatake in Nagano Prefecture. There, I was stunned by the physicality and the huge number of species of moss that grow in the mountains. When I came back from Nagano, I bought every moss-related book I could find in the local bookstore, and I started reading as soon as I got home.

Mosses of Yakushima

Huge varieties of moss can be found almost anywhere in Japan

One of the first things I learned from these books was that Japan is one of the richest environments for moss growth anywhere in the world. Around 18,000 species of moss exist in the world today, and despite being a small country that occupies about 0.25% of the Earth's surface, Japan is home to nearly 1,700 of those species, or roughly 10% of the world total.

The main reason for this abundance is Japan's extraordinarily diverse climate. From Hokkaido in the north to Okinawa in the south, from low-lying coastal areas to inland cliffs with long mountain chains more than 3,000 meters tall, Japan concentrates a huge range of topographies into a very small space. This, combined with the country's high annual rainfall, creates ideal conditions for moss to grow and thrive. On the whole, moss is a very fickle life form that won't grow at all if the surrounding conditions are not perfect. But in Japan's diverse ecology, moss can find all kinds of nice places to live.

Even in Japanese cities, seemingly far away from the natural abundance of Yakushima or Yatsugatake, you'll often see moss growing on the asphalt along urban backstreets. And if you look at it closely, you'll see that even this curbside moss comes in more than one variety. In a spot that, at a glance, may seem extremely inhospitable to any kind of plant life, close examination reveals more species of moss than you can count, growing greenly over small cracks by the sidewalk.

And really, although I haven't made a detailed study of this, I'm beginning to realize that, if you look carefully, you can find moss almost anywhere you go looking for it. Even if you don't have the opportunity to travel far from home, you can discover species of moss unique to wherever you live. As I become more and more knowledgeable, the most interesting thing about moss is that there's really almost no way to avoid it.

Even on city asphalt, you'll find fascinating species of moss

The provocative shapes on the other side of your magnifying glass

he average moss spore is very small, between a few millimeters and a few centimeters wide, but moss is famous among botanists for its functional beauty. What the naked eye may see as no more than a blank green carpet quickly reveals an elaborate formal composition when you magnify it as little as ten times. Moss grows from spores – that is,unlike seed-growing plants, it reproduces by scattering spores away from its body, and the organs it has evolved to propagate these spores reveal designs so elaborate you might mistake them for some kind of experimental art.

The "soul" of moss viewing, I believe, lies the romance of destroying, with one glance through a magnifying glass, the preconception that moss is just worthless, insignificant fuzz, and forcing yourself to confront the beauty of the tiny formations under your feet. That belief hasn't faded as my years of moss viewing have gone by; if anything, it's stronger today than it ever was.

The otherworldly beauty of moss capsules

Japan's can't-miss moss viewing spots

Finally, I'd like to share a few of the top moss viewing locations in Japan. If you're interested in the world of Japanese moss, these are the places you simply can't miss.

The major locations are Yakushima in Kagoshima Prefecture and Yatsugatake in Nagano – which I mentioned earlier – as well as Oirase-Keiryū in Aomori. These three areas are full of dense mossy forests, and the local guides have recently started offering moss-themed tours and moss viewing parties, in addition to compiling "Moss Photobooks" detailing the species of moss in the region. In recent years, these regions have been reimagined as tour grounds targeted specifically at moss lovers, and they've become known as the "three holy lands" of Japanese moss.

Oirase-Keiryū, Aomori Prefecture

Koke no Sato forest in Hiyōmachi, Komatsu City, Ishikawa Prefecture

On the other hand, if you want enjoy the moss in Japanese gardens or at temples and shrines, your best bets are the Saihō-ji, Hōnen-in, Giōji, and Ginkakuji temples in Kyoto, the Koke no Sato "Forest of Wisdom" in Hiyōmachi, Ishikawa Prefecture, and the Hakone Museum in Hakone, Kanagawa.

If you want to take photos, it's best to choose a cloudy day with light rain

Of course, since moss grows everywhere, you don't have to travel around the world to find it. But wherever you go looking, be sure to bring a 10x magnifying glass with you, plus a camera and at least one moss photobook. When it's time to plan your viewing, keep in mind that a cloudy day with light rain brings out the texture of wet moss in its most vibrant condition.

The author, lost in the invisible world of moss (photo by Atsuko Tsujino)

And if you're out and you happen to see someone gazing at moss by the side of the road, by all means go up to them and say hello. Japan's "moss boom" is still in its early stages, and not that many people have discovered the pleasures of Japanese moss. Most moss lovers are still plying a lonely hobby, with nobody around who shares their passion. It may look odd to crouch by the side of the road and stare at a green splotch, but anyone you see doing that will have exciting stories to tell about the beauty of the mossy world that stretches out under their magnifying glass. Those stories are worth hearing.

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