

Japan: Seasonal Series

February Setsubun

Setsubun is an ancient festival still celebrated every February in Japan. It marks a new start, the end of the coldest months and the beginning of spring, when new seeds are planted and things begin to grow. Many years ago, when people in Japan used a lunar calendar, setsubun marked the beginning of the New Year. There used to be four setsubun festivals, one at each change of season. Now only the one at the beginning of spring is celebrated.



There are several ways of celebrating, all based on old folk tales associated with the festival. The most common is bean throwing (mamemaki). One member of the family (usually a man, maybe dad or oldest son) dresses up as a devil (oni). The rest of the family then throw soya beans at him, shouting “oni wa soto, fuku wa uchi!” This means “demons out, good luck in!”

Then each person picks up beans and later eats the number corresponding to their age. The person chosen to throw the beans is usually someone who is born under the sign of the same zodiac animal of the coming year. In Japan, each year is associated with an animal. For example, 2021 was the year of the ox and 2022 the year of the tiger.

When people eat the number of beans corresponding to their age, they do this for good luck; especially if they are aged 25 or 42 (men), and 19 or 33 (women). These years are known as “yakudoshi” - unlucky years. Some people believe that unfortunate events are likely to happen in these years.

Don't try eating dried soya beans - in Japan they sell special, edible setsubun beans!

People also hang sardine heads and holly leaves on the door of their houses. These are supposed to keep the demons away. Temples and shrines all over Japan hold special celebrations at setsubun. Famous people, often sumo wrestlers, are invited to come and throw beans to the crowds of people who come to watch.

