

Tea caddies



HANDICRAFTS MADE WITH CHERRY TREE BARK

Kaba-zaiku, the craft of making things using the bark of cherry trees, has been passed down through the generations in one place alone, Kakunodate, Akita Prefecture.

Shidare-zakura (weeping cherry trees) in front of a former samurai residence in Kakunodate





1 Kaba-zaiku products
2 Tea caddy
3 Card case
4 Box

SATO KUMIKO

KABA-ZAIKU, the craft of making things using the bark of *Yamazakura* (Japanese mountain cherry), is a traditional handi-craft of Kakunodate in Semboku City, Akita Prefecture. The bark lends a comfortable texture and rich colors to the kaba-zaiku products.

Craftspeople in Kakunodate make tea caddies, trays, smartphone covers and other products that utilize the beauty, strength and moisture-blocking characteristics of the bark. The red pigment in the bark increases proportionally as the products are lovingly used over time, and the bark gradually takes on an amber color.

Kakunodate was a castle town in the Edo period (early seventeenth to second half of the nineteenth centuries) and many samurai residences from the time are still standing in the town. Kakunodate is also famous for its *Shidare-zakura* (weeping cherry trees) that cover the entire town with blossom in spring. It is said that the Kubota clan which governed most of present-day Akita Prefecture encouraged low-ranking samurai to produce Kaba-zaiku in the eighteenth century as a side business, and the tradition is now supported by approximately sixty

craftspeople in Kakunodate.

Yamazakura older than thirty years old provide the materials for Kaba-zaiku, and the bark is now collected from the mountains of six prefectures in the Tohoku region of northeast Japan, including Akita Prefecture. Takashima Machiko, the supervisor of the Kakunodate Cooperative Craft Union, says, “Good quality bark can be collected from trees that have grown in the severe environment of the mountains.”

Yamazakura, which is a wild species, has a strong vitality and the bark regenerates after being carefully stripped. The collected bark is dried for more than three years. It is then whittled and polished by hand, cut to the appropriate shape and glued to the surface of a wooden base using *nikawa* animal glue. Other Kaba-zaiku techniques include *tatamimono*, which entails carving pre-assembled layers of cherry bark into small shapes and polishing them for jewelry and other uses.

Takashima says, “In recent years, the natural beauty of Kaba-zaiku has achieved recognition around the world and sales channels have expanded, mainly in Europe.”

Young craftspeople are encouraged by the exposure their craft is receiving overseas. This Kakunodate tradition is going from strength to strength. ■