

Character Profile

Meaning:

lawn grass

Note: Several dictionaries define 芝 as “lawn,” but that’s misleading, as this kanji doesn’t represent the whole lawn. Nor does it mean “grass,” which the Japanese represent with 草 (くさ). Rather, 芝 stands for any type of lawn grass, such as sod or turf.

Joyo yomi:

On: None

Kun: しば

In names: し, しく, しげ, しば, ふさ

Type of on-yomi:

呉音 (ごおん, from Chinese readings of the 5th–6th c.): シ

Keyword for remembering the yomi:

しば: 芝居 (しばい: performance, play, drama)

Relative importance and difficulty:

1072nd most-used kanji in newspapers
Learned in junior high school in Japan
JLPT level: N1

Radical:

艹 (くさかんむり: the “grass” radical)

Note: To learn more about this radical, see [Radical Note 140](#).

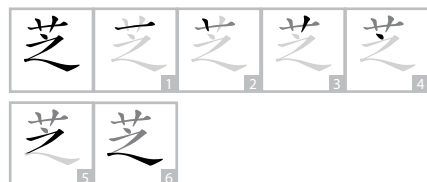
Don’t confuse 芝 with this look-alike:

乏 (1805: destitution)

Don’t confuse 芝 with this sound-alike:

しば: 縛る (1701: to arrest)

Strokes: 6



Read All About It!

Halpern	1380
Henshall	1335
Spahn	3k2.1
Denshi Jisho	Click here

Lawn Theater

English speakers associate several things with the word “grass.” If you’re bored, you might say, “Ugh, this is like watching grass grow.” You can also let grass grow under your feet; that means you’re procrastinating. Grass can be good for smoking, of course. And then there’s a weird threat: “Your ass is grass.” I believe that might mean, “I’m going to shred you as if I were mowing grass,” but that’s just a guess.

Meanwhile, there isn’t anything idiomatically interesting about the English word “lawn.” Okay, one dictionary says it can mean “poor-quality marijuana” and provides this sample sentence: “This isn’t good grass; it’s lawn.” Seriously?! Aside from that, I can’t find many hidden treasures (linguistically speaking) in our lawns.

By contrast, the “lawn grass” kanji plays a part in several unexpected expressions. Before we explore the rich idiomatic aspects of 芝, let’s look at its literal meaning:

芝 (しば: lawn grass, such as sod or turf)

When Japanese people discuss lawns, they do so with a compound, rather than just 芝:

芝生 (しばふ: lawn)

lawn grass + to grow

The word 芝生 is ateji; although 生 has scads of yomi, ふ is not one of them. Rather, someone must have chosen 生 to represent the ふ in しばふ because “growth” is a perfect attribute for a lawn.



The peaceful scenery of Sado Island, northwest of Honshu. The green leaves may be some kind of crop, rather than your typical lawn grass, but let’s not be sticklers!

Photo Credit: Eve Kushner

Etymology Box

In 芝, the 艹 is the “grass” radical. That’s not surprising to find in a character that means “lawn grass”! The 之 in 芝 has nothing to do with the non-Joyo character 之 (これ: this). When it comes to 芝, the 之 is a highly stylized version of an old character that meant “plant.” Here’s 之 in its seal-script incarnation:



© Richard Sears

At one point, says Henshall, this “plant” character meant “to emerge,” just as a plant emerges from the ground. Then, by extension, the character came to mean “from.” Inside 芝, says Henshall, 之 means “emerging plant.” Here’s a seal-script version of 芝:



© Richard Sears

Lawn Maintenance in Japan¹

Here’s a sentence that would confuse me if I heard it:

芝は刈る必要がある。
The grass needs cutting.
刈る (かる: to clip, cut);
必要 (ひつよう: necessary)

To me, the beginning would sound like “*Shiba wakarū ...*” The grass understands? But of course that’s not what’s being said.

On hearing this sentence, the lawn guy would grab his machine:

芝刈り機 (しばかりき: lawnmower)
lawn grass + to cut + machine

Some people write this as 芝刈機, but the well-respected dictionary *Kojien* uses the interstitial り.

With a 芝刈り機, he could then do this:

芝刈り (しばかり: lawn mowing)
lawn grass + to cut

Again, some people write this as 芝刈, but *Kojien* tacks on the final kana.

Keep Off the Grass!

It’s not uncommon to see Japanese signs saying “Keep off the grass!” If you spot either of these warnings, you would do well to stick to the pavement:

芝生を大切に。
Go easy on the grass.
大切に (たいせつに: carefully, with caution, with great care)

芝生に入るな。
Keep off the grass!
入る (はいる: to enter)

If you disregard these signs and walk on the lawn, someone might admonish you with one of the following rebukes, both of which sound arrogant:

芝生の上を歩くな。
Don’t walk on the grass.
上 (うえ: on); 歩く (あるく: to walk)

芝生から出なさい。
Get off the lawn!
出る (でる: to exit, leave)

Get off, already! How many times do I have to tell you?!

One person, though, needn’t heed that sign. I’m talking about whoever cuts the grass. More on that task at the sidebar.¹

Theater Causes Grass Stains

If you know the pretentious characters Frasier and Niles Crane from the TV show *Frasier*, you know they love nothing more than opera, theater, fine wine, and above all the great indoors. Nature is the foe of these squeaky-clean types. If a mere leaf lands on their suits, it practically ruins the whole day. A picnic on the grass would be anathema.

Imagine my surprise, then, to find lawn grass inside a term that means “affected, theatrical, pompous”:

芝居がかった (しばいがかった: affected, theatrical, pompous)
lawn grass + sitting

Although 居 often means “to exist,” Halpern defines it as “sitting” in this word. The がかった comes from 掛かる (かかる: to hang) and has been voiced. People tend to write this part of 芝居がかった in hiragana.

In Old Japan, plays took place on lawns. As we saw in the essay on 猿 (1028: monkey), the aristocracy watched performances from benches, whereas the riffraff sat right on the grass. Benches—ah, well, I suppose the Crane brothers would have been spared the threat of grass stains. (But what about splinters? Surely, they’re a far greater risk.)

Although the grassy venues of Old Japan’s theaters have given way to elegant theaters, that history shines through in this word:

芝居² (しばい: performance, play, drama) lawn grass + sitting

Sample Sentences with 芝居²

Here are some ways you might see 芝居 in a sentence:

彼の芝居は当たった。

His play was a hit.

彼* (かれ: he); 当たる (あたる: to hit the mark)

どの芝居がいいですか。

Can you recommend a play?

私達はその芝居の切符を予約した。

We booked seats for the play.

私達 (わたしたち: we);
切符 (きっぷ: tickets);
予約 (よやく: reservation)

お芝居は好きですか。

Do you like the theater?

好き* (すき: liking, fondness)

In this last sentence, 芝居 means “the theater”—not a building but the art of putting on plays. Think of the question Simon and Garfunkel asked: “Is the theater really dead?” This is the kind of “theater” 芝居 represents.

Here’s how to ask someone to a play:

芝居に誘う (しばいにさそう: to invite to a play)

play (1st 2 kanji) + to invite

A sample sentence:

彼女は英語が好きなので、シェイクスピアの芝居に誘った。

Because she likes the English language, I invited her to a Shakespeare play.

彼女 (かのじょ: she);
英語 (えいご: English language)

The word 芝居 has given rise to this term:

芝居小屋 (しばいごや: playhouse)

play (1st 2 kanji) + small + house

People use this only for small theaters. Time for a Quick Quiz about the theater.

Quick Quiz 1

You may know 筋 from 筋肉 (きんにく: muscle). The kanji 筋 has many meanings. It’s also unusual in that its three components (竹, bamboo; 月, flesh and moon; and 力, power) can all serve as radicals. Given all that, what do you think this word means?

芝居の筋 (しばいのすじ)

- a. play about muscular athletes
- b. play about bamboo splinters in flesh
- c. play about powerful bamboo in the moonlight
- d. plot of a play



Sado Island lawn. Too bad about the power line!

Photo Credit: Eve Kushner

Is Shiba Inu a Grass-Stained Dog?

You may have heard of the dog breed shiba inu. It's called that in both English and Japanese. As the yomi of 芝 is しば, you might be envisioning a dog who loves to roll on his back in the grass. Ah, but the kanji rendering of "shiba inu" has a different first character, one that's non-Joyo:

柴犬 (しばいぬ or しばけん: shiba inu) **brushwood, firewood + dog**

So this dog likes to roll on firewood? Ouch! Not to worry. According to [Wikipedia](#), "brushwood" is a tree or shrub whose leaves turn red in autumn. That could be the origin of the term 柴犬, either because these dogs used to hunt in wild shrubs or because a shiba inu often has reddish fur. There's also an old Nagano dialect in which *shiba* meant "small." That could explain the nomenclature of this small breed.



Photo Credit: Eve Kushner

Shiba inu in Nikko, Japan.

Answer to Quick Quiz 1

d. 芝居の筋 (しばいのすじ) means "plot of a play." With the yomi of すじ, 筋 can mean "plot," as is the case here.

Drama Queens and Phonies

The theater enriches any culture, but acting can have one unfortunate side effect—theatricality.

To criticize people for being melodramatic, the Japanese might elaborate on 芝居 in several ways, including this one:

芝居っ気 (しばいつけ: a theatrical way) **theater (1st 2 kanji) + spirit**

One could also write this compound as 芝居気, pronouncing it as しばいげ or しばいぎ, but 芝居っ気 (しばいつけ) seems more common. A sample sentence:

彼は芝居っ気たっぷりに事件の経緯を話し始めた。
He started to talk theatrically about how the incident happened.
たっぷり (plenty); 事件 (じけん: incident);
経緯 (いきさつ: how things got this way);
話し始める (はなしはじめる: to start to talk)

Sometimes the Japanese take 芝居 and dress it up a bit, resulting in this term:

芝居じみていた (しばいじみていた: theatrical)

The suffix comes from 染みる (じみる: tainted (with a quality), tinged (with)) and means "to be tinged with." When the past-tense form -じみていた (or -じみた) serves as a suffix, that makes the whole word function as an adjective. That's the case in the following sentence:

彼の振る舞いは芝居じみていた。
His behavior was theatrical.
振る舞い (ふるまい: behavior)

Besides theatricality, acting is associated with another unpleasant trait: dishonesty. After all, actors pretend to be people they're not. The word 芝居 can convey inauthenticity, so people use it in situations that have nothing to do with the stage:

下手な芝居は止めなさい。
Stop putting on an act.
下手 (へた: unskillful); 止める (やめる: to stop)

With 下手 the speaker is essentially saying, "You're doing a bad job of it and not fooling anyone."

Here are two more sentences in which 芝居 conveys a lack of honesty:

遅刻したのを、病気のせいにするなんてお前は芝居がうまいね。

You're a good actor, pretending you were late because you don't feel well.

遅刻 (ちこく: lateness); 病気 (びょうき: sickness); お前 (おまえ: you (derogatory nuance)); うまい (skilled)

彼は本気でそう言っているのではない、芝居をしているだけだ。

He doesn't mean it; he's just acting.

本気 (ほんき: serious); 言う (いう: to say)

The first part of the last sentence literally translates as "He (彼) isn't (ではない) saying (言っている) it (そう) seriously (本気で)."

Quick Quiz 2

Now that you have a solid footing in the use of 芝 and 芝居, try matching the following terms to their definitions:

- | | |
|--------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. 人形芝居 (にんぎょうしばい) | person + shape + lawn grass + sitting |
| 2. 一人芝居 (ひとりしばい) | one + person + lawn grass + sitting |
| 3. 人工芝 (じんこうしば) | person + manufactured + lawn grass |
| 4. 素人芝居 (しろうとしばい) | crude + person + lawn grass + sitting |
| 5. 一芝居 (ひとしばい) | one + lawn grass + sitting |

- a. artificial lawn grass
- b. trick; act
- c. one-person show; performing solo
- d. puppet show
- e. amateur dramatic performance



A field on Sado Island features blooming hydrangeas and a kanji sign. The first part, 旅籠 (はたご), means "inn." Breaking down as **travel + basket**, 旅籠 originally meant "woven bamboo basket in which travelers carried food." Long ago, that food was for horses. Later, people started using the baskets for human food. Then in the Edo era, 旅籠屋 (はたごや) and the abbreviation 旅籠 came to mean "inn that serves food." People rarely use this term anymore except in the names of inns. Meanwhile, 清九郎 (せいくろう) is a man's given name.

Photo Credit: Eve Kushner

Answers to Quick Quiz 2

- 1.d. 人形芝居 (にんぎょうしばい: **person + shape + lawn grass + sitting**) means “puppet show.” As you can see, 人形 (puppet) breaks down as **person + shape** and means “doll”!
- 2.c. 一人芝居 (ひとりしばい: **one + person + lawn grass + sitting**) means “one-person show; performing solo.” Here’s an alternate way of writing this with the same yomi and meaning: 独り芝居, where 独り (ひとり) means “solo.”
- 3.a. 人工芝 (じんこうしば: **person + manufactured + lawn grass**) means “artificial lawn grass.”
- 4.e. 素人芝居 (しろうとしばい: **crude + person + lawn grass + sitting**) means “amateur dramatic performance.” The first two kanji, 素人 (しろうと), combine to mean “amateur, novice.” You may have noticed that the typical yomi of 人 don’t fit with the yomi しろうと. That’s because 素人 is ateji. As for 素, this usually means “element” (as in 酸素, さんそ: oxygen), and it can even mean “naked” (as in 素肌, すはだ: bare skin), which threatens to make 素人芝居 a very racy kind of theater! However, 素 can also mean “plain, simple, unpretentious, natural, unadorned, unrefined, raw, crude.” These definitions are the relevant ones in 素人.
- 5.b. 一芝居 (ひとしばい: **one + lawn grass + sitting**) means “trick; act.”

Tricky, Tricky

The last term in the quiz, 一芝居, combines with 打つ (うつ: to make, perform, conduct) in this expression:

一芝居打つ (ひとしばいうつ: to use a trick, put on an act) **trick (1st 3 kanji) + to perform**

A sample sentence:

田中は君のために一芝居打っているんだよ。
Tanaka is putting on an act for you.
田中 (たなか: surname); 君 (きみ: you)

We know from ために that Tanaka is trying to help you, maybe deceiving someone on your behalf to save face. However, 一芝居打つ doesn’t always come with good intentions. Take, for example, this sentence:

田中は一芝居打って大もうけした。
Tanaka used a trick to make a huge profit.
大もうけ (おおもうけ: large profit, a killing)

Here, Tanaka is up to no good with his tricks. We’ve seen that going to the theater may once have caused grass stains. The concept of 一芝居打つ may also involve stains on one’s character!

Verbal Logic Quiz

Here are two questions about Japanese culture:

1. Which Japanese company is named after lawn grass?

2. In English we say, "The grass is always greener." The Japanese have also adopted this saying. Here's their version:

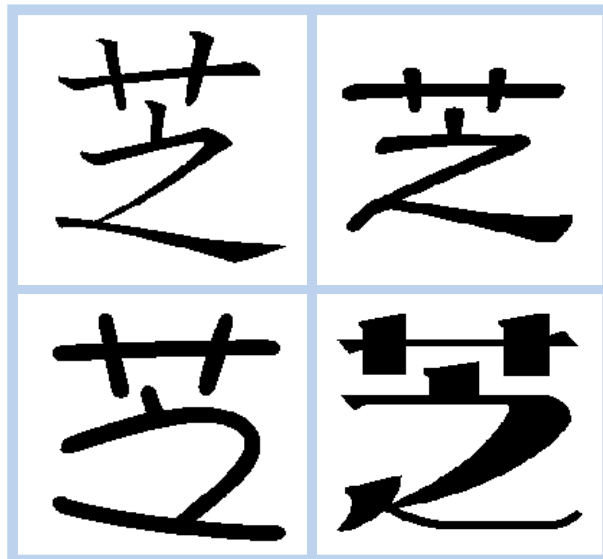
隣の芝生は青い。

The grass is always greener on the other side.

隣* (となり: next door, neighbor); 青い (あおい: green)

Traditionally, the Japanese have expressed this kind of envy by referring to things other than lawns. What were those things? Two answers are correct.

- a. a rose that was redder
- b. a mochi that was bigger
- c. a kimono that was prettier
- d. a rice field that was more productive



Answers to the Verbal Logic Quiz

1. Toshiba (東芝) was named after lawn grass. Well, that's kind of true.

The original name was 東京芝浦電気:

東京 (とうきょう: Tokyo)

east + capital

芝浦 (しばうら: name of a place in Tokyo)

lawn grass + inlet bay

電気 (でんき: electricity)

electricity + energy

So the company was actually named after a section of Tokyo, which in turn was named after lawn grass. It must have been soggy lawn grass, judging from the meaning of 浦! In this Tokyo subway map, a red arrow points to a station in 芝浦:



Photo Credit: Eve Kushner

Incidentally, the 埠 (ふとう) tagging after 芝浦 means “wharf, pier, quay.” The 埠 is standing in for 埠, a non-Joyo kanji meaning “wharf.”

Two stations to the north, we find 竹芝 (たけしば), which breaks down as **bamboo + lawn grass!** And due west of that, under the red line, we find 芝公園 (しばこうえん), which could well feature a park (公園, こうえん) filled with lawn grass. So much grass in this area! Why does anyone call Tokyo a concrete jungle?!

2.a and b. The Japanese have traditionally said the following things:

隣の花は赤い。

The rose is always redder on the other side.

花 (はな: flower); 赤い (あかい: red)

隣の牡丹餅は大きい。

The other person's azuki bean mochi looks bigger.

牡丹餅 (ぼたもち: azuki bean mochi); 大きい (おおきい: big)

A few notes are in order. The initial sentence doesn't explicitly refer to a rose (ばら) but rather to a flower (花) that's red (赤い). In the second sentence, the initial kanji in 牡丹餅 is non-Joyo. Both sentences refer to the neighbor's property, whether roses or mochi. Finally, neither expression uses the typical syntax for comparisons (... のほうが ... より). Rather, 隣 conveys this comparison—and the injustice of it all!

お知らせ

お客様各位

平素は銀座TSビル(旧銀座東芝ビル)をお引き
立ていただき、厚く御礼申し上げます。

This is the first part of a sign outside the Ginza TS Building. Our star kanji appears above in parenthetical text: Photo Credit: Eve Kushner

旧- (きゅう-: former, old, ex-)
銀座* (ぎんざ: section of Tokyo)
東芝 (とうしば: Toshiba (company name))

This means "formerly known as the Ginza Toshiba Building." Altogether, the text in the sign says, "Notice. To all customers: We're deeply grateful to you for supporting the Ginza TS Building (formerly known as the Ginza Toshiba Building) in the past." Here's the rest of the vocabulary:

お知らせ (おしらせ: notice, notification)
お客様 (おきゃくさま: customers)
各位 (かくい: everyone, ladies and gentlemen)
平素 (へいそ: ordinary, in the past, regular)
引き立てる (ひきたてる: to support, promote)
厚い (あつい: deep, cordial, abundant)
御礼申し上げる (おんれいもうしあげる: to express gratitude, stated in humble language)

The sign goes on to say that most of the building is closed for renovation and apologizes for this inconvenience.



This Osaka sign for 東芝 (とうしば) クレジット (credit) advertises a credit card that Toshiba Finance Company has issued.

The bottom part of the sign, 加盟店 (かめいてん), means “participating stores.”

Photo Credit: Eve Kushner