

Lawn Theater

Character Profile

Meaning:
lawn grass

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)

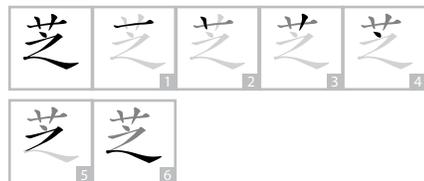
Relative importance and difficulty:
1072nd most-used kanji in newspapers
Learned in junior high school in Japan
JLPT level: N1

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 tie (something))

Strokes: 6



Read All About It!

| | |
|--------------|----------------------------|
| Halpern | 1380/1867 |
| Henshall | 1335/1428 |
| Kanshudo | Click here |
| Denshi Jisho | Click here |

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 have originally meant “I’m going to shred you as if I were mowing grass,” but that’s just a guess.

Meanwhile, there is nothing 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 芝 plays a part in several unexpected expressions.

Before we explore its rich idiomatic aspects, let’s look at its literal meaning:

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

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

When the Japanese discuss lawns, they use this compound, not just 芝:

芝生 (しばふ: lawn) **lawn grass + to grow**



Photo Credit: Eve Kushner

The peaceful scenery of Sado Island in Niigata Prefecture, northwest of Honshu. We’re probably seeing rice plants, rather than lawn grass, but let’s not be sticklers!

Etymology Box

The *Kanjigen* etymology for 芝 simply says that it consists of the “grass” radical 艹 + the phonetic 之, which means “to grow quickly” in this context.

The newer edition of Henshall indicates something quite different. He says the 艹 means “plant, vegetation, grass” and calls 之 a pictograph, noting that scholars disagree about whether it originally represented “vegetation newly emerged from the ground” or “a foot trying to advance beyond a line.” Either way, 之 has the extended sense of “to go.” In 芝, though, that phonetic contributes the associated sense “wondrous.” Thus, says Henshall, 芝 initially meant “wondrous plant,” originally referring to a type of mushroom thought to promote longevity.

Kanjigen tells us that 芝 can still represent that kind of mushroom. Both sources say that only in Japan did 芝 come to mean “turf, grass.”



© Richard Sears
Seal-script version

Lawn Maintenance¹

This sentence 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)

I would hear the beginning as “*Shiba wakaru...*” 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 + cutting +
machine

Some people write this as 芝刈機.

With a 芝刈り機, he could then do this:

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

Again, some people write this as 芝刈.

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)

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 leave)

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

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

Theater Once Caused Grass Stains

If you’re familiar with 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 Japan plays used to take place on lawns. Aristocrats 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 performances now occur in theaters, the history shines through in this word, which lies at the heart of 芝居がかった:

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

Sentences with 芝居²

Here are ways to use 芝居:

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: fond)

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?” That’s what this 芝居 represents.

This phrase enables you to share a theatrical experience with someone:

芝居に誘う (しばいにさそう:
to invite to a play)
play (1st 2 kanji) + to invite

Here’s 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 word only for small theaters.

Quick Quiz 1

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

芝居の筋 (しばいのすじ)

- play about muscular athletes
- play about bamboo splinters in flesh
- play about powerful bamboo in the moonlight
- plot of a play



Photo Credit: Eve Kushner

A Sado Island lawn. Too bad about the power line!

Is Shiba Inu a Grass-Stained Dog?

You may have heard of a shiba inu. This dog breed is 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 its back in the grass. No, 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 しば meant “small.” That could explain the nomenclature of this small breed.



Photo Credit: Eve Kushner

A shiba inu in Japan.

Answer to Quick Quiz 1

d. 芝居の筋 (しばいのすじ: **play (1st 2 kanji) + plot**) means “plot of a play.” When read as すじ, 筋 can mean “plot.”

Drama Queens and Phonies

The theater enriches any culture, but acting can have an unfortunate side effect—namely, 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 term 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. Here’s 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)

Here’s another 芝居 spinoff:

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 term function as an adjective.

Here’s a way of using the keyword:

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)

Acting is associated not only with theatricality but also with dishonesty. After all, actors pretend to be people they’re not. The word 芝居 (without any add-ons) 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, with a 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 latter 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 grasp 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)
2. 一人芝居 (ひとりしばい)
3. 人工芝 (じんこうしば)
4. 素人芝居 (しろうとしばい)
5. 一芝居 (ひとしばい)

person + shape + lawn grass + sitting
1 + person + lawn grass + sitting
person + manufactured + lawn grass
crude + person + lawn grass + sitting
1 + lawn grass + sitting

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



Photo Credit: Eve Kushner

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 (1603–1867), 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.

Answers to Quick Quiz 2

I have revised all of the breakdowns to reflect the true meanings of the the kanji combinations inside these words:

1.d. 人形芝居 (にんぎょうしばい: **puppet (1st 2 kanji) + performance (last 2 kanji)**) means “puppet show.” As you can see from the revised breakdown, 人形 (**person + shape**) means “puppet” or “doll”!

2.c. 一人芝居 (ひとりしばい: **1 + person + performance (last 2 kanji)**) means “one-person show; performing solo.” You can also write the term as 独り芝居, where 独り (ひとり) means “solo.”

3.a. 人工芝 (じんこうしば: **artificial (1st 2 kanji) + lawn grass**) means “artificial lawn grass.” Note that 人工 (**person + manufactured**) means “artificial.”

4.e. 素人芝居 (しろうとしばい: **amateur (1st 2 kanji) + performance (last 2 kanji)**) means “amateur dramatic performance.” The first two kanji, 素人, combine to mean “amateur, novice.” The typical readings of 人 don’t fit with しろうと because 素人 is ateji. As for 素, this usually means “element” and can even mean “naked,” which threatens to make 素人芝居 a very racy kind of theater! However, 素 can also represent “plain, simple, unpretentious, natural, unadorned, unrefined, raw, crude,” as in 素人.

5.b. 一芝居 (ひとしばい: **1 + performance (last 2 kanji)**) means “trick; act.”

Tricky, Tricky

The last term in the quiz, 一芝居, rarely stands alone. Rather, the Japanese almost always combine it with 打つ 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**

Here’s 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)

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

Where We've Been, What We've Seen

Thus far, the pronunciation of 芝 has remained the same; we have consistently read it with the Joyo kun-yomi しば. The meaning of the character has also stayed constant; 芝 represents "lawn grass." Nevertheless, only these terms pertain to grass:

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

芝生 (しばふ: lawn)

lawn grass + to grow

芝刈り (しばかり: lawn mowing)

lawn grass + cutting

芝刈り機 (しばかりき: lawnmower)

lawn grass + cutting + machine

人工芝 (じんこうしば: artificial lawn grass)

artificial (1st 2 kanji) + lawn grass

Our star kanji also means "lawn grass" in this important word, thanks to the history of Japanese theatrical venues, but the term as a whole no longer has anything to do with grass:

芝居 (しばい: performance, play, drama)

lawn grass + sitting

This word lies at the heart of all the other keywords we've seen, including these terms about plays:

芝居に誘う (しばいにさそう: to invite to a play)

lawn grass + sitting + to invite

芝居小屋 (しばいごや: playhouse)

play (1st 2 kanji) + small + house

芝居の筋 (しばいのすじ: plot of a play)

play (1st 2 kanji) + plot

The next words represent particular types of shows (and coincidentally all include 人):

人形芝居 (にんぎょうしばい: puppet show)

puppet (1st 2 kanji) + performance (last 2 kanji)

一人芝居 (ひとりしばい: one-person show; performing solo)

1 + person + performance (last 2 kanji)

素人芝居 (しろうとしばい: amateur dramatic performance)

amateur (1st 2 kanji) + performance (last 2 kanji)

The theater is a wonderful institution but can have unfortunate side effects:

芝居がかった (しばいがかった: affected, theatrical, pompous)

芝居っ気 (しばいつけ: theatrical)

theater (1st 2 kanji) + spirit

芝居じみていた (しばいじみていた: theatrical)

As the theater is a place to create illusions, perhaps it's not surprising to find 芝居 in this word:

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**

Master the material in this essay by playing [games](#) from our partner Kanshudo!

Time for your Verbal Logic Quiz!

Verbal Logic Quiz

1. Which Japanese company is named after lawn grass?
2. English speakers say, "The grass is always greener." The Japanese have adapted this saying as follows:

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)

But 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 (sticky rice cake) 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, which breaks down as follows:

東京 (とうきょう: Tokyo)

芝浦 (しばうら: name of a place in Tokyo)

電気 (でんき: electricity)

east + capital

lawn grass + inlet bay

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 corresponds to the non-Joyo 埠 (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, 牡 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。

Photo Credit: Eve Kushner

In the first part of a sign outside a Tokyo building, 東芝 (とうしば: Toshiba) appears in the parenthetical text, but let's read the words in order.

The sign begins with this:

お知らせ お客様各位

Notice To all customers

お知らせ (おしらせ: notice); お客様 (おきやくさま: customers); 各位 (かくい: everyone)

Then comes the following sentence:

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。

We're deeply grateful to you for always supporting the Ginza TS Building (formerly known as the Ginza Toshiba Building).

平素 (へいそ: usually); 旧 (きゅう: former); 銀座 (ぎんざ: Ginza, a section of Tokyo);

引き立てる (ひきたてる: to support); 厚い (あつい: deep); 御礼申し上げる (おんれいもうしあげる: to express gratitude, stated in humble language)

That part of the sign doesn't mean much, but the next bit says 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



Photo Credit: Eve Kushner

In a teahouse sign in the Kowloon part of Hong Kong, we find 芝 written with the old form of the “grass” radical, 艸. We also return to a concept I briefly mentioned in the Etymology Box—namely, that 芝 can represent a type of mushroom. In Chinese and Japanese, that fungus goes by this name:

靈芝 (れいし: lingzhi mushroom) **spirit + mushroom**

Note that 芝 carries the シ sound here. I mentioned that non-Joyo on-yomi in the Character Profile, but this is the first time we’ve seen it in action. The Japanese borrowed this compound from Chinese, where it’s more important because the mushroom plays a role in Traditional Chinese Medicine. Known as the “mushroom of immortality,” it has been revered for more than two millennia, says [Wikipedia](#). That source quotes another to explain the use of 靈 in the name 靈芝: “(The mushroom) is said to absorb the earthy vapors and to leave a heavenly atmosphere.” How does it do that?

Let’s return to the sign. Reading the top line from right to left, we find the teahouse name 靈芝堂. Actually, the first character appears in its variant form 靈. The next line, again from right to left, is 涼茶館, which describes the place as a refreshing teahouse. The bottommost writing goes from left to right, with 法輪常轉 meaning “The wheel of life never stops turning.” This is the slogan of [Falun Gong](#), 法輪功 (ほうりんこう or ファールンゴン), a Chinese religious practice with some connection to the venue.