



JAPAN INFORMATION  
AND CULTURE CENTER  
在米国日本大使館広報文化センター

# TEACHING TUESDAY

## KOTATSU

Unlike many Western homes, Japanese dwellings are not equipped with central air and heating. During the winter, space heaters are the most common warming element, but another popular way to keep warm is the kotatsu 炬燵. A low table with a wooden frame, the kotatsu is covered by a kotatsugake (火燵掛布 kotatsu futon) to trap in heat from the heater built in under the table.

Kotatsu tables weren't originally tables. In the 14th century, the original heating element was the irori 囲炉裏, a charcoal powered hearth that also served as a stove. People enhanced the irori by placing a wooden platform with a blanket on top to separate the cooking areas from the seating, and trap the heat under the platform. This became known as a hori-kotatsu 掘り炬燵, where ko 炬 means fire and tatsu 燵 means foot warmer. The design was changed in the Edo period with the invention of the sunken irori, which involved digging out the ground in a square shape and placing the platform and blanket on top. The portable kotatsu started at the end of the 17th century, as tatami mats became popular. A charcoal pot was placed under the table on top of the tatami, making it easy to move the kotatsu everywhere. This was originally called oki-gotatsu 置き炬燵 with oki 置き meaning placement. Now, with electricity, heating elements are built into the frame, the kotatsu is completely portable, and a popular way to stay warm.

Other elements of a kotatsu include a shitagake 下掛け (a blanket goes under kotatsugake), a zabuton 座布団 (oversized pillow use to sit on), and a kotatsushiki こたつ敷き (rug). Although it seems inefficient to only heat the lower part of the body, when it was created, the heat travelled through the bottom of the kimono and trapped itself in the body. Nowadays, some people even take naps or sleep under kotatsu.