Samurai Weapons

The samurai used various weapons, Bushido taught that a samurai’s soul is in the katana that they carried. Sometimes a samurai is pictured as entirely dependent on the katana for fighting. This is much different than the role of a crossbow in medieval Europe and the role of sword to a knight, here the weapon serves as a symbol of being samurai, which is of greater importance than the katana qua weapon. Upon reaching the age of thirteen, in a ceremony called Genpuku (元服), a male child was given a wakizashi and an adult name and became a samurai. This also gave him the right to wear katana though it was usually sealed with strings to prevent accidental drawing of a katana. A katana and a wakizashi together are called a daisho (lit. "big and small").

The wakizashi itself was a samurai's "honour blade" and purportedly never left the samurai’s side. He would sleep with it under his pillow and would be taken with him when he entered a house and had to leave his main weapons outside.

The Tanto was a small dagger sometimes worn in place of the Wakizashi in a daisho. It was used should it become necessary to commit seppuku or hara-kiri, (suicide by disembowelment).

The samurai's weapon of choice was the yumi (bow) and it was unchanged for centuries until the introduction of gunpowder and rifle in the 16th century. A Japanese style compound bow was not a very powerful weapon in comparison with the Eurasia reflex composite bow. Its size made it possible to shoot various projectiles like fire arrows and signal arrows at an effective range of 50 meters or less, over 100 meters when accuracy was not an issue. It was usually used on foot behind a tedate (手盾), a large and mobile bamboo wall, but it could be used even from horseback. The practice of shooting from horseback became a Shinto ceremony of Yabusame (流鏑馬).

In the 15th century, the yari (spear) also became a popular weapon. It displaced the naginata from the battlefield as personal bravery became less of a factor and battles became organized. It was simpler and more deadly than a katana. A charge, mounted or dismounted, was more effective when using a spear and it offered better than even odds against a samurai using a tachi, a katana adapted to mounted combat. In the Battle of Shizugatake where Shibata
Katsuie was defeated by Toyotomi Hideyoshi, then known as Hashiba Hideyoshi, the Seven Spearmen of Shizugatake (賤ヶ岳七本槍) played a crucial role in the victory.

One of the biggest controversies surrounding the weapons of the samurai is whether samurai ever charged on horseback. Horses of that time were smaller yet durable but it was questionable how well they would perform carrying heavily armored samurai. A traditional belief held that samurai mainly fought on horseback acting as heavy cavalry and charged through hapless foot soldiers. It is currently believed that samurai mainly fought on foot and used horses for transportation and only occasionally charged on disarrayed and retreating enemies. The Battle of Nagashino was one of such battle where samurai supposedly charged on horseback.

After the matchlock rifle was introduced from Europe, samurai started practicing with this weapon. It became the favorite weapon of some samurai for sniping on the battlefield as samurai were awarded for every enemy he took down himself, though commanding was an important aspect of samurai. Conscription soldiers also used matchlock rifles but instead fired in volleys to break up enemy ranks. Toward the end of the feudal period, some samurai organized dragoons as part of their troops and some were reportedly used in the Battle of Sekigahara and later battles.

Some samurai were unarmed on the battlefields except for katana. Takeda Shingen was one such samurai. This did not mean that they fought using katana. Instead, they focused on commanding and were confident that they could trust those they commanded for protection. In the Battle of Kawanakajima, Shingen was almost killed. A plan went wrong and troops of Uesugi Kenshin charged Shingen's lines, who were unaware that his entrapment plan had been detected. With only half of his troops and completely surprised, Shingen himself had to defend his life with the wooden stick that he used to order attacks. The rest of his soldiers barely returned in time to save Shingen and the rest of his force from being completely wiped out. Legend says that it was Uesugi Kenshin who personally rode up and attacked Takeda Shingen with his sword.

Other weapons used by samurai were jo, bo, grenade, catapult and cannon. However, specific samurai sometimes favored others. In battles around Meiji restoration, more modern weapons like the Gatling gun and rifles were used.