

THE STORY OF PLANTS: JAPANESE CHERRY

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IN 1912 A SHIP ARRIVED in Seattle from Japan. It was carrying 3,000 flowering cherry trees, a gift from the mayor of Tokyo to the people of the United States. The trees were rigorously examined, loaded in climate-controlled railroad cars, and shipped to Washington, D.C. First Lady Helen Taft was waiting with plans to turn a swamp into a beautiful capital. Mrs. Taft and Viscountess

Chinda, the wife of the Japanese ambassador, planted the first two trees. These trees, still growing, are the cornerstone of the famous cherry allée around the Tidal Basin.

Mrs. Taft planted more than a tree. The ornamental cherry was very little known in the West. They were difficult to procure as well as to propagate. And they didn't produce fruit, a hard sell to the pragmatic Americans. A few existed in private collections in Europe and the U.S., but it was their debut on the banks of the Potomac that awoke the wary public's heart to what the Japanese had been celebrating for millennia.

Ornamental cherries probably arrived in Japan from China with Buddhism in the 5th century. Within a hundred years the cult of the cherry was well established; no Japanese garden was without cherry trees. At that time *Hanami*, or cherry viewing, began as a celebration of the ephemeralness of life, the beauty of the falling blossoms as revered as their opening. Poetry was written and hung



Japanese flowering cherry

on the branches. *Sake* was drunk under the blossom-laden trees as love affairs began and ended. Today *Hanami* is the chief event in the Japanese social calendar. TV stations track cherry blooming times like storm fronts. Millions crowd parks drinking, lovemaking, and of course taking pictures. The Cherry Blossom Festival in D.C. nearly rivals it, being one of the more heavily attended events there.

Though a wide variety of ornamental cherries are planted throughout D.C., the original 3,000 were Yoshino cherries (*Prunus x yedoensis*). As one of the most beautiful, vigorous, and easy to propagate of the ornamental cherries, it is also the most popular not only in Japan but worldwide. The simple pinkish blooms, appearing before the leaves, fade to white and create a stunning contrast against the dark smooth bark. The only complaint I have read is that it is short-lived, surviving only 80 years.

Compared to the record 1,800 year-old weeping Higan cherry (*Prunus x subhirtella*) in Japan, it is indeed short-lived.

Cherries are quite promiscuous and inter-specific hybrids are common and encouraged. They were the center of horticultural attention in Japan from the 16th through the 18th centuries, much like the rose in the West. Today, there are 196 *sato-sakura*, or "village-cherries," as

these cultivars are called. With nearly 350 names, even the experts are confused. There are much fewer available to us.

Finding room for a large Yoshino, or my favorite 'Mt. Fuji', with its wide spreading habit and large, double blossoms is difficult. Yet there are smaller cherries available. I love the wild-looking 'Okame' with early dainty reddish flowers. 'Akebono', an American cultivar, is an elegant choice, as is columnar 'Amanogawa' towering like a plume of smoke.

About 800 of the Yoshino cherries planted around the Tidal Basin in 1912 are still alive. Each year another one succumbs to age; they are already past their due date. In a sense they are as fleeting as spring, as history, as life.

So when our 'Mt. Fuji' drops its petals this spring I'm going to raise a cup of *sake* to their passing.

And to life. 🍷

Read more of Daniel's thoughts on plants and gardening on his blog www.danielmountgardens.blogspot.com.