History of the Cherry Trees

The plantings of cherry trees originated in 1912 as a gift of friendship to the People of the United States from the People of Japan. In Japan, the flowering cherry tree, or "Sakura," is an exalted flowering plant. The beauty of the cherry blossom is a potent symbol equated with the evanescence of human life and epitomizes the transformation of Japanese culture throughout the ages.

1885: Mrs. Eliza Ruhamah Scidmore, upon returning to Washington from her first visit to Japan, approached the U.S. Army Superintendent of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds, with the proposal that cherry trees be planted one day along the reclaimed Potomac waterfront. Her request fell on deaf ears. Over the next twenty-four years, Mrs. Scidmore approached every new superintendent, but her idea met with no success.
1906: Dr. David Fairchild, plant explorer and U.S. Department of Agriculture (http://www.usda.gov) official, imported seventy-five flowering cherry trees and twenty-five single-flowered weeping types from the Yokohama Nursery Company in Japan. He planted these on a hillside on his own property in Chevy Chase, Maryland, where he attempted to test their hardiness.

1907: The Fairchilds, pleased with the success of the trees, began to promote Japanese flowering cherry trees as the ideal type of tree to plant along avenues in the Washington area. Friends of the Fairchilds also became interested and on September 26, arrangements were completed with the Chevy Chase Land Company to order three hundred Oriental cherry trees for the Chevy Chase area.

1908: Dr. David Fairchild gave cherry saplings to children from each District of Columbia school to plant in their schoolyard for the observance of Arbor Day. In closing his Arbor Day lecture, Dr. Fairchild expressed an appeal that the "Speedway" (no longer existing, but marked by portions of Independence and Maine Avenues, SW and East and West Basin Drives, SW, around the Tidal Basin) be transformed into a "Field of Cherries." In attendance was Eliza Scidmore, to whom he referred later as a great authority on Japan.
1909: Mrs. Scidmore decided to try to raise the money required to purchase the cherry trees and then donate them to the city. As a matter of course, Mrs. Scidmore sent a note outlining her plan to the new first lady, Helen Herron Taft. Mrs. Taft had lived in Japan and was familiar with the beauty of the flowering cherry trees. Two days later the first lady responded:

The White House, Washington

April 7, 1909

Thank you very much for your suggestion about the cherry trees. I have taken the matter up and am promised the trees, but I thought perhaps it would be best to make an avenue of them, extending down to the turn in the road, as the other part is still too rough to do any planting. Of course, they could not reflect in the water, but the effect would be very lovely of the long avenue. Let me know what you think about this.

Sincerely yours,

Helen H. Taft

April 8: The day after Mrs. Taft's letter of April 7, Dr. Jokichi Takamine, the Japanese chemist who discovered adrenaline and takadiastase, was in Washington with Mr. Midzuno, Japanese consul in New York. When he was told that Washington was to have Japanese cherry trees planted along the Speedway, he asked whether Mrs. Taft would accept a donation of an additional two thousand trees to fill out the area. Mr. Midzuno thought it was a fine idea and suggested that the trees be given in the name of the City of Tokyo. First Lady Taft agreed to accept a donation of 2,000 cherry trees.
April 13: Five days after Mrs. Taft's request, the Superintendent of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds, Colonel Spencer Cosby, U.S. Army, initiated the purchase of ninety Fugenzo Cherry Trees (Prunus serrulata "Fugenzo") from Hoopes Brothers and Thomas Co., West Chester, PA.

The trees were planted along the Potomac River from the site of the Lincoln Memorial southward toward East Potomac Park. After planting, it was discovered that the trees were not named correctly. The trees were determined to be the cultivar Shirofugen (Prunus serrulata "Shirofugen") and have since disappeared.

August 30: The Japanese Embassy informed the Department of State that the City of Tokyo intended to donate to the United States two thousand cherry trees to be planted along the Potomac River.

December 10: Two thousand cherry trees arrived in Seattle, Washington from Japan.
**1910:** On January 6, the two thousand trees arrived in Washington, D.C.

**January 19:** To everyone's dismay, an inspection team from the Department of Agriculture discovered that the trees were infested with insects and nematodes, and were diseased. To protect American growers, the department concluded that the trees must be destroyed.
January 28: President William Howard Taft granted his consent to burn the trees.

January 29: a newspaper article in the Evening Star mentions that "about a dozen" of the "buggiest trees" were saved for further study, and "planted out in the experimental plot of the bureau, and there will be an expert entomologist with a dark
lantern, and a butterfly net, cyanide bottle and other lethal weapons placed on guard over the trees, to see what sort of bugs develop".

The probable diplomatic setback was alleviated by letters from the Secretary of State to the Japanese Ambassador expressing the deep regret of all concerned. All parties involved from Japan met the distressing news with determination and good will.

Tokyo Mayor Yukio Ozaki and others suggested a second donation be made, and the Tokyo City Council authorized this plan. The number of trees had now increased to 3,020. The scions for these trees were taken in December 1910 from the famous collection along the bank of the Arakawa River in Adachi Ward, a suburb of Tokyo, and grafted onto specially selected understock produced in Itami City, Hyogo Prefecture.

1912: February 14, 3,020 cherry trees from twelve varieties were shipped from Yokohama on board the S.S. Awa Maru, bound for Seattle. Upon arrival, they were transferred to insulated freight cars for the shipment to Washington, D.C.

March 26: 3,020 cherry trees arrived in Washington, D.C. The trees were comprised of the following varieties:

"Somei-Yoshino" .........................1,800
"Ari ake" ........................................100
"Fugen-zo" ......................................120
"Fuku-roku-ju" ..............................50
"Gyo-i-ko" .......................................20

(The Gyoiko were all planted on the White House Grounds)

"Ichioy" ...........................................160
"Jonioi" ...........................................80
"Kwan-zan" ......................................350
"Mikurumagayeshi" ..........................20
"Shira-yuki" .....................................130
"Surugadainoi" ...............................50
"Takimoi" .......................................140

Total ...........................................3,020
March 27: Helen Herron Taft and the Viscountess Chinda, wife of the Japanese Ambassador, planted two Yoshino cherry trees on the northern bank of the Tidal Basin, about 125 feet south of what is now Independence Avenue, SW. At the conclusion of the ceremony, the first lady presented a bouquet of "American Beauty" roses to Viscountess Chinda. Washington's renowned National Cherry Blossom Festival grew from this simple ceremony, witnessed by just a few persons. These two original trees still stand several hundred yards west of the John Paul Jones Memorial, located at the terminus of 17th Street, SW. Situated near the bases of the trees is a large bronze plaque which commemorates the occasion.

1913 - 1920: Workmen continued planting Yoshino trees around the Tidal Basin. The cherry trees of the other eleven varieties and the remaining Yoshino trees were planted in East Potomac Park.

1927: April 16, the original planting of Japanese cherry trees was commemorated by a re-enactment of the event by Washington school children.

1934: The District of Columbia Commissioners sponsored a three-day celebration.

1935: The first "Cherry Blossom Festival" was sponsored jointly by many civic groups and became an annual event in subsequent years.
1938: So prominent were the cherry trees that a group of indignant women chained themselves together near them in a political statement against President Franklin D. Roosevelt. They sought to stop the workmen who were preparing to clear ground for the construction of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial. A compromise was reached wherein more trees would be planted along the south side of the Tidal Basin to frame the memorial.

More info on the Cherry Tree Rebellion (http://www.nps.gov/nama/blogs/Cherry-Tree-Rebellion.htm).

1940: Cherry Blossom Pageant was introduced

1941: December 11, four cherry trees were cut down in suspected retaliation for the Japanese attack against the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The exact reason for the vandalism never was substantiated. In hopes of preventing future damage during the Second World War, the trees were referred to as the "Oriental" flowering cherry trees.

1948: Cherry Blossom Princesses were selected from each State of the Union as well as from each federal territory. From these princesses, a queen was chosen to reign during the festival.

1952: The famed cherry tree grove along the Arakawa River near Tokyo, parent stock for Washington's first trees, had fallen into decline during World War II. Japan requested help to restore the grove in the Adachi Ward, and the National Park Service shipped budwood from descendants of those same trees back to Tokyo in an effort to restore the original site.
1954: March 30, Sadao Iguchi, the Japanese Ambassador to the United States, presented a 300-year-old Japanese Stone Lantern to the City of Washington to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the first Treaty of Peace, Amity and Commerce between the United States and Japan signed by Commodore Mathew Perry at Yokohama on March 31, 1854. The lantern, made of granite, is eight feet high and weighs approximately two tons. The National Cherry Blossom Festival officially is opened by the lighting of the lantern.

1957: Mr. Yositaka Mikimoto, President of Mikimoto Pearls, Inc., donated the Mikimoto Pearl Crown that is used at the coronation of the National Cherry Blossom Festival Queen on the night of the Grand Ball. The crown contains more than two pounds of gold and has 1,585 pearls. This magnificent crown is ceremonial, and because of its weight the young lady, who is crowned Queen, will wear the famous piece for just a few moments. She is given a miniature crown of gold, with a pearl topping each point, to wear for the remainder of the evening and to keep thereafter as her own.
1958: April 18, the Japanese Pagoda, hewn out of rough stone, was placed on the southwest bank of the Tidal Basin and dedicated. It was presented as a gift to the City of Washington, D.C., by the Mayor of Yokohama to "symbolize the spirit of friendship between the United States of America manifested in the Treaty of Peace, Amity and Commerce signed at Yokohama on March 31, 1854..."

1965: The Japanese Government made another generous gift of 3,800 Yoshino trees to another first lady devoted to the beautification of Washington, Lady Bird Johnson, wife of President Lyndon Baines Johnson. American-grown this time, many of these are planted on the grounds of the Washington Monument. Lady Bird Johnson and Mrs. Ryuji Takeuchi, wife of Japan's Ambassador, reenacted the planting ceremony of 1912.

1982: Approximately eight hundred cuttings from the Tidal Basin Yoshino trees were collected by Japanese horticulturists to retain the genetic characteristics of the trees and replace trees destroyed in Japan when the course of a river was changed. Other exchanges and gifts have benefited both cities. Through this cycle of giving, the cherry trees have fulfilled their role as a symbol and an agent of friendship.

1986 to 1988: A total of 676 new cherry trees were planted at a cost of over $101,000 in private funds donated to the National Park Service to restore the number of trees to what they were at the time of the original gift.

1994: The National Cherry Blossom Festival was expanded from one week to two weeks.

1996: March 27, signing of the Sister River Agreement between the Potomac, which flows through Washington, D.C., and the Arakawa, which originates on scenic Mt. Kobushi in Saitama Prefecture.

1997: June 17, in cooperation with the United States National Arboretum, cuttings were taken from the documented, surviving 1912 Yoshino cherry trees shipment, to ensure preservation of the trees' genetic lineage. These trees will be used in subsequent replacement plantings to preserve the genetic heritage of the grove.

1999: November 15, Fifty trees, propagated from the 1,400+ year old "Usuzumi" cherry tree growing in the village of Itasho Neo in Gifu Prefecture of Japan, were planted in West Potomac Park. It is said that the 26th Emperor Keitai of Japan planted the tree 1,500 years ago to celebrate his ascension to the throne. The "Usuzumi" tree was declared a National Treasure of Japan in 1922.

2002 - 2006: Four hundred trees, propagated from the surviving trees from the 1912 donation, were planted to ensure that the genetic lineage of the original trees is continued.

2011: Approximately 120 Propagates from the surviving 1912 trees around the Tidal Basin were collected by NPS Horticulturists and sent back to Japan to the Japan Cherry Blossom Association to retain the genetic lineage. Through this cycle of giving,
the cherry trees continue to fulfill their role as a symbol and as an agent of friendship.


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