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Japanese Cherry Blossoms Bring Smiles to Millions

By Dr Reese Halter

Conservation biologist, Broadcaster

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Hundreds of thousands of visitors come from around the globe to witness the spring majesty of Washington DC's flowering cherry trees. This breathtaking event reminds us that trees are remarkable.

There are over 80,000 tree species and they've inhabited our planet for over 350 million years. They provide watersheds to supply drinking water to billions of people, protect cities from storm water runoff, and reduce heating and cooling costs to our homes and buildings by 40 percent.

Trees and forests are massive carbon dioxide warehouses, and in return they provide oxygen, enabling life on Earth. Trees yield some of the most potent cancer, coronary and other disease-fighting medicines known to humankind.

This year, our [Cherry Blossom Festival](#) extends from March 26 to April 11. The magnificent white, pink and double pink cherry blossoms are nature's way of ushering in spring and enticing us, after a long, cold winter, to explore the outdoors of our nation's capital city.

The story of these exquisite cherry trees is a rich tapestry interwoven by visionary women, children and peace.

In 1885, [Eliza Ruhamah Scidmore](#), an American travel writer, photographer and naturalist returned from Japan and first proposed to the U.S. Army Superintendent of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds that Japanese flowering cherry trees beautify the banks of the reclaimed Potomac waterfront.

It took 24 years for Mrs Scidmore, the first female board member of National Geographic Society, to finally [realize her vision](#). In 1909, she wrote to First Lady Helen Herron Taft and suggested planting Japanese flowering trees or sakura - - known in Japan as the exalted flowering plant. First Lady Taft graciously embraced the idea and saw it to fruition.

A gift from the city of Tokyo of 3,020 cherry trees, from cuttings along the bank of the Arakawa River in Tokyo grafted onto specially selected under-stock, arrived in Washington DC on March 26, 1912.

The next day, First Lady Taft and Viscountess Chinda, wife of the Japanese Ambassador, planted two Yoshino cherry trees on the northern bank of the Tidal Basin.

Incidentally, those two cherry trees are still thriving -- 99 years later, a couple hundred yards west of the John Paul Jones Memorial at the end of 17th Street, SW.

To commemorate this historic event, schoolchildren in 1927 re-enacted the tree-planting ceremony.

A Cherry Blossom Pageant was created in 1940.

By 1947, the festival spanned two days and over 450,000 people crammed the Tidal Basin to celebrate the glorious

spring cherry blossoms.

Each year, the National Cherry Blossom Festival officially commences by lighting an eight-foot-high, 20-ton granite lantern, a gift from Japan in 1954 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the first Treaty of Peace, Amity and Commerce by the United States and Japan of March 31, 1854.

In 1957, Yositaka Mikimoto, president of Mikimoto Pearls, donated a Mikimoto pearl crown used each year at the coronation of the National Cherry Blossom Festival Queen on the night of the Grand Ball.

First Lady, Lady Bird Johnson accepted another generous gift of 3,800 Japanese flowering cherry trees in 1965, and with Mrs. Ryuji Takeuchi, wife of the Japanese Ambassador, re-enacted the 1912 tree planting ceremony.

Perhaps the most coveted of all the tree gifts over the past century arrived in November 1999. Fifty trees were propagated from a 1,500 year old Usuzumi cherry tree planted by the 26th Emperor Keitai of Japan in 499 AD in the village of Itasho Neo, to celebrate his ascension to the throne.

Today, 12 species of flowering cherry trees, or almost 3,800 specimens, grace our nation's capital city.

The vast majority are Yoshino cherries. Their elegant, profuse, pale pink, almond-scented spring flowers fade to white and sometimes last on the trees for a couple weeks. Later in the summer Yoshino black cherry fruit becomes an important food source for many songbirds.

Yoshino cherries line the Tidal Basin, West Potomac Park and the grounds of the Washington Monument.

The very attractive, double pink flowers of the Kwanzan cherries are found along East Potomac Park. They flower a couple weeks after the Yoshino cherries.

The National Treasure of Japan, or the 50 Usuzumi cherry trees, were planted in West Potomac Park.

From the cities of Seattle to San Diego to Macon, Georgia and arboretums from Brooklyn to St. Louis to Woodside, California -- Americans rejoice as Japanese flowering cherries bring warm smiles and the joy of spring to our proud nation.

All citizens of Earth offer our deepest prayers to the hundreds of thousands of Japanese left homeless from the March 10, 2011 tsunami and the entire country as they face fall-out from the radiation of the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear plant.

Dr Reese Halter is an Earth Doctor; Science Communicator: Voice for Ecology, conservation biologist at Cal Lu University and public speaker. His upcoming book is entitled The Insatiable Bark Beetles: Harbinger of Global Warming (Rocky Mountain Books). He can be contacted through <http://DrReese.com>