

The National Cherry Blossom Festival

Japanese ornamental cherry trees may be found blooming in many places around the globe, though only in America's capital city is their blossoming as symbolic as it is spectacular. Those of you planning to attend the AAG Annual Meeting may consider spending a few extra days in Washington, D.C. prior to the conference to attend the parade, festival, or other activities, or may simply wish to visit the Tidal Basin. In 2010, the National Cherry Blossom Festival® will open on March 28, with the annual parade and *Sakura Matsuri* (the largest Japanese-style street festival in the United States) to be held on April 10. The two-week long Festival includes participants from around the world and features cultural performances, exhibits, tours, a parade, and fireworks.

as a symbol of peace and friendship between Japan and the United States has continued to this day, overcoming the conflict of World War II. Today, the trees and the Festival that celebrates them stand for courage against all odds, the importance of actively seeking peace through cultural understanding, and the power of friendships between nations. The dramatic setting of more than 1,600 trees encircling the Tidal Basin plus a similar number planted around Hains Point and hundreds more throughout the city create an unforgettable sight.

Ornamental cherry trees were among the first exports by the Japanese after the "opening" of Japan by Commodore Matthew C. Perry in 1854. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, cherry blossom trees were planted in public and private spaces in

the city of Washington and on the grounds of estates and developments in the surrounding area. It was, however, the gift of the trees planted around the Tidal Basin in 1912 that captured the imaginations of American artists, poets, and photographers. The curve of the Tidal Basin, leading the eye in an arc to the Washington Monument, has long been a favorite vantage point for artful views of the cloud-like masses of blooms.

As Maud Kay Sites wrote, "In the pale grey dawn the rosy cloud of blossoms heralds the sunrise, under the noonday sun it glows with the paler radiance, and in the moonlight it is the living expression of the poet's soul."

Some say cherry blossom trees originated in the Fertile Crescent of the Middle East. Their seeds



The cherry blossom trees edging the Tidal Basin have inspired artists of all kinds since the trees were first planted in 1912.

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Cherry blossoms around the Tidal Basin in Washington, D.C., signify spring, courage, and international friendship. The National Cherry Blossom Festival® attracts more than one million visitors each year to the nation's capital.

CREDIT: TERRY J. ADAMS, NPS

While Washington's many visitors and residents alike celebrate the cherry blossom trees each spring, few understand their significance. The gift of the Japanese ornamental cherry trees from the city of Tokyo to the city of Washington in 1912 was an expression of gratitude by Japan, acknowledging President Theodore Roosevelt's role in forging the Treaty of Portsmouth in 1905, ending the Russo-Japanese War. Their importance



Members of the first official Japanese delegation to the United States in 1860, photographed in Matthew Brady's studio in Washington, D.C.

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The earliest known cherry blossom festival was held in 1927. In a photo of the occasion, two women clasp hands, portraying the friendship between America and Japan.

the samurai, the cherry blossom evoked the beauty of a short life well-lived since its petals fall from the tree unwithered and in their prime.

The earliest known festival celebrating the blooming cherry trees in Washington was held in 1927. It was a simple afternoon pageant, re-enacting the planting of the first trees near the Tidal Basin and honoring the friendship between the two nations. By 1934, the festival was a three-day affair and in 1935 it included the crowning of the first Cherry Blossom Queen. For many years, the Cherry Blossom Festival and the crowning of its Queen was a highlight of the city's social season, similar to debutante activities elsewhere and involving prominent families, including in many cases the President's wife. First Ladies continue to be involved with



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Live performances are a key aspect of the Festival.

the Festival by serving as Honorary Chair of the National Cherry Blossom Festival®. Beginning in the 1950s, the Cherry Blossom Queen was chosen by the spin of a wheel, as she is now. The lucky winner wears a crown as she rides in a float in the Cherry Blossom Festival Parade®, a highlight of the two-week long celebration. She is Queen for a year and travels to Japan, representing the United States in cherry blossom events there.

see on otherwise shrubby and undistinguished trees—symbolize the essence of human life well-lived, of the possibility of the ordinary transformed into something extraordinary, even if only for a moment. As the poet Motoori famously expressed it: "If one should ask you concerning the spirit of a true Japanese, point to the wild cherry blossom glowing in the sun."

Japanese emperors and their courts established viewing rituals and traditions by the 9th century, C.E. Called *hanami*, these practices and patterns expanded to include the samurai during the period of their rule under the Shogunate, and were later adopted by common people. The cherry blossom was an important symbol for samurai warriors. Their highly disciplined life as cultured men of war had as a highest goal to die an honorable death, preferably in the line of duty to their overlord and in the prime of life. To



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In 1951, the Cherry Blossom Queen hailed from Wyoming after a random spin of the wheel stopped on her home state.

In addition to the crowning of the Queen, the National Cherry Blossom Festival® includes daily, multi-cultural performances in front of the Jefferson Memorial. Elsewhere in the city, museums, embassies and public centers offer special exhibits, tours, and tastings—all emphasizing the importance of international friendships. The *Sakura Matsuri* takes place on the same day and immediately following the Festival's parade. The Yoshino trees around the Tidal Basin often bloom as early as March 15 and as late as April 18. The Festival draws more than one million people to Washington, including many from overseas. For more information about the Festival, visit www.nationalcherryblossomfestival.org. ■

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