



Cherry blossom festivals: an American tradition that almost wasn’t

BY KENNETH SETZER - FAIRCHILD TROPICAL BOTANIC GARDEN
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A cherry tree blooms in Washington. KENNETH LAMBERT / AP FILE

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Imagine the nation’s capital without its icons: no Washington Monument, no White House, no Lincoln Memorial and Reflecting Pool. It wouldn’t be recognizable as Washington. Let’s not forget the flowering cherry trees and their celebrated blossoms. But this living herald of spring nearly went up in smoke forever.

During D.C.’s development in the early 20th century, planners sought trees with which to line the long avenues. Nowadays, there would likely be an outcry if non-native trees were used, but worry over non-native or invasive plants was not on people’s minds a century ago.

Eliza Scidmore, a prolific travel writer, photographer and first woman member of the National Geographic board, was well versed in all things Japanese. She had fallen for the watercolor painting-like blossoms of the cherry trees (*Prunus serrulata*) while exploring Japan, where they are native. She had tried for years to introduce them to Washington landscaping, particularly the Tidal Basin area, but her efforts failed — until she wrote to first lady Helen Taft, who had experienced cherry blossoms herself while in Japan.

Meanwhile, never ones to overlook a plant with potential, David and Marian Fairchild too had taken note of cherry blossoms and imported 100 of the trees from Japan. They experimented with growing the trees at their home in Chevy Chase, Maryland, which they called “in the woods.”

After monitoring their hardiness, and being pleased with the result, Fairchild — then head of the Foreign Seed and Plant Introduction Section of the U.S. Department of Agriculture — began introducing the Japanese trees to landscaping and local horticulture.

In celebration of Arbor Day in 1908, he gave a cherry sapling to one student from each local school to plant it in their own schoolyard, with a public streetcar reserved for the transportation of the children to and from “in the woods.”

With Fairchild’s endorsement and Mrs. Taft’s encouragement, funding was arranged to purchase the trees. The Japanese consul, however, heard of the plan to introduce trees from his homeland to the “Speedway” and other areas around Washington. He arranged for the city of Tokyo to donate 2,000 trees to the United States.

From Japan, the trees were brought across the Pacific to Seattle, then by train to Washington, where they arrived in January of 1910. However, upon USDA inspection, the trees were found to be heavily infested with insects and nematodes deemed a potential threat to American agriculture. “Ghastly as it seems,” all 2,000 trees were burned, Fairchild recounted later.

International good will prevailed, and in 1912 more than 3,000 trees were donated as a gift from the people of Japan. This time, inspectors gave the shipment a clean bill of health.

On March 27, 1912, the first two trees were planted in a modest ceremony. By 1938, the trees had become such a beloved part of the city that when some were threatened by construction of the Jefferson Memorial, the “Cherry Tree Rebellion” protest ensured the affected trees would be safely transplanted, not destroyed.

Now the National Cherry Blossom Festival is held every spring in Washington. Its origins go back to 1935, though in Japan the practice of *hanami*, or flower viewing, has been traced back at least to the eighth century. Similar to a picnic, *hanami* involves enjoying the beauty of outdoors, nature and renewal, the company of friends and of course food and drink — much like the current Cherry Blossom Festival.

The National Park Service website (www.nps.gov/cherry) provides ample information on viewing the cherry blossoms, including a forecast of peak bloom times (April 11-14 this year) and a map of tree locations. Most are located in the Tidal Basin and Lower Potomac River shore, though the cherry blossoms can be spotted throughout the city.

Of the 3,800 *Prunus serrulata* trees currently in the park, there are about a dozen varieties and cultivars growing. This allows for different color flowers — white, blush, pink, even gray — as well as a staggered bloom time, so if you miss the bright white Yoshinos, you can still enjoy large, pink Kwanzan flowers a couple of weeks after.

Cherry blossom festivals have spread to other cities in the U.S. and Europe, but you’ll have to leave South Florida to see them. While David and Marian Fairchild would be thrilled to see our love for the cherry blossoms, we cannot grow the trees in the extreme deep south.

Until you visit the trees for yourself, find comfort in this Haiku-like poem that an unnamed guest wrote on a cocktail napkin at a farewell dinner for the Fairchilds to express how they felt leaving their own beloved cherry blossoms when they retired from Maryland to Coral Gables:

Only in dreams of spring

Shall I see again

The flowering of my cherry trees.

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