

Japanese Flowering Cherry Trees

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Mall and Memorial Parks
Washington, D.C.



*"If this world had never
known the ephemeral charms
of cherry blossoms
then our hearts in spring might match
nature's deep tranquility."*

- Ariwara no Narihira

Beyond Blossoms

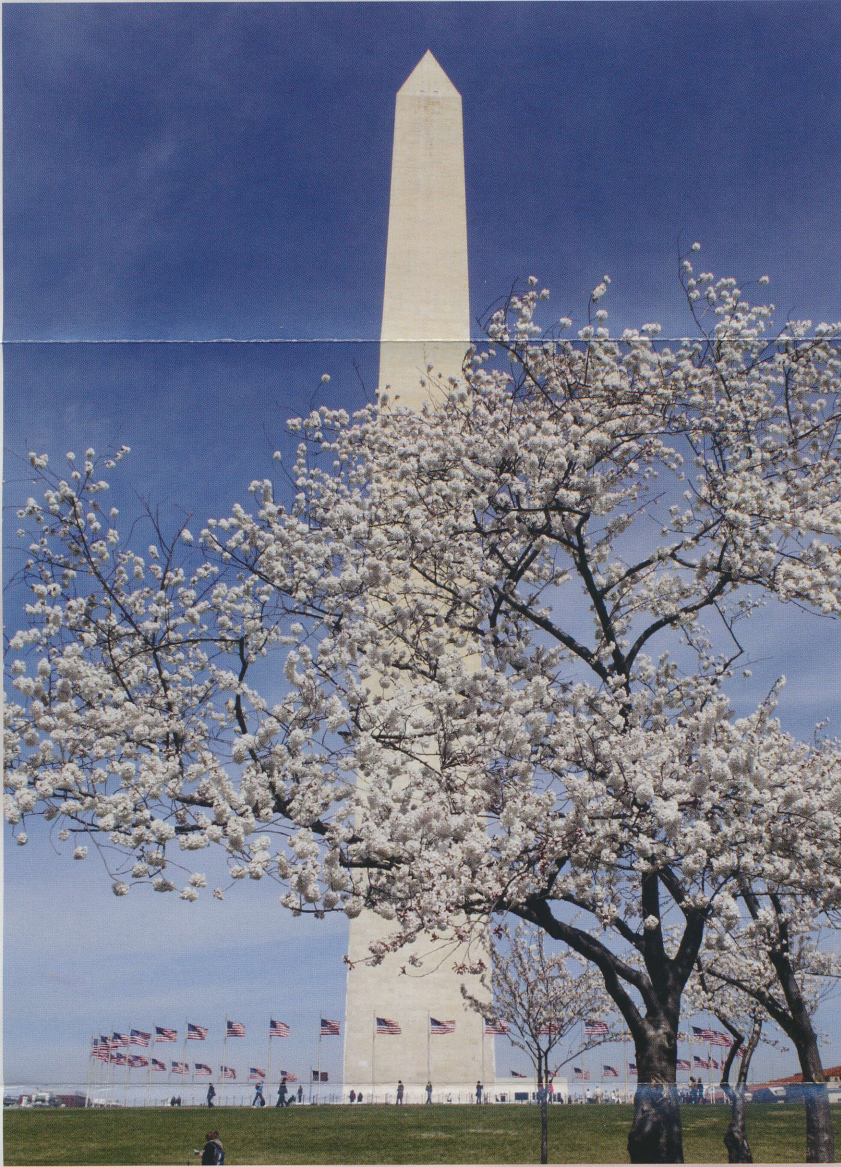
This year, 2012, marks the one hundredth year since Japanese flowering cherry trees first graced the National Mall. The National Cherry Blossom Festival began in 1935 and is now one of the largest annual public events hosted by the United States. Over one million people are expected to attend. Much of this popularity stems from the historical significance of these trees. Gifts from Tokyo, the cherry trees symbolize friendship between Japan and the United States. Some interpret the trees as representing friendships between all peoples.

Though primarily ambassadors from Japan, the cherry trees are also ambassadors of nature itself, reminding us of our connection to the earth. They symbolize both endurance and age, while the clouds of blossoms embody the bounty of nature. The blossoming trees signal the arrival of spring, evoking thoughts of awakening and rebirth. They are also enjoyed simply for their beauty.

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Washington Monument

Poets cited:

Saigyō Hoshi (1118 – 1190)

Japanese Buddhist monk famous for poetry

Ariwara no Narihira (825 – 880)

Japanese nobleman and poet

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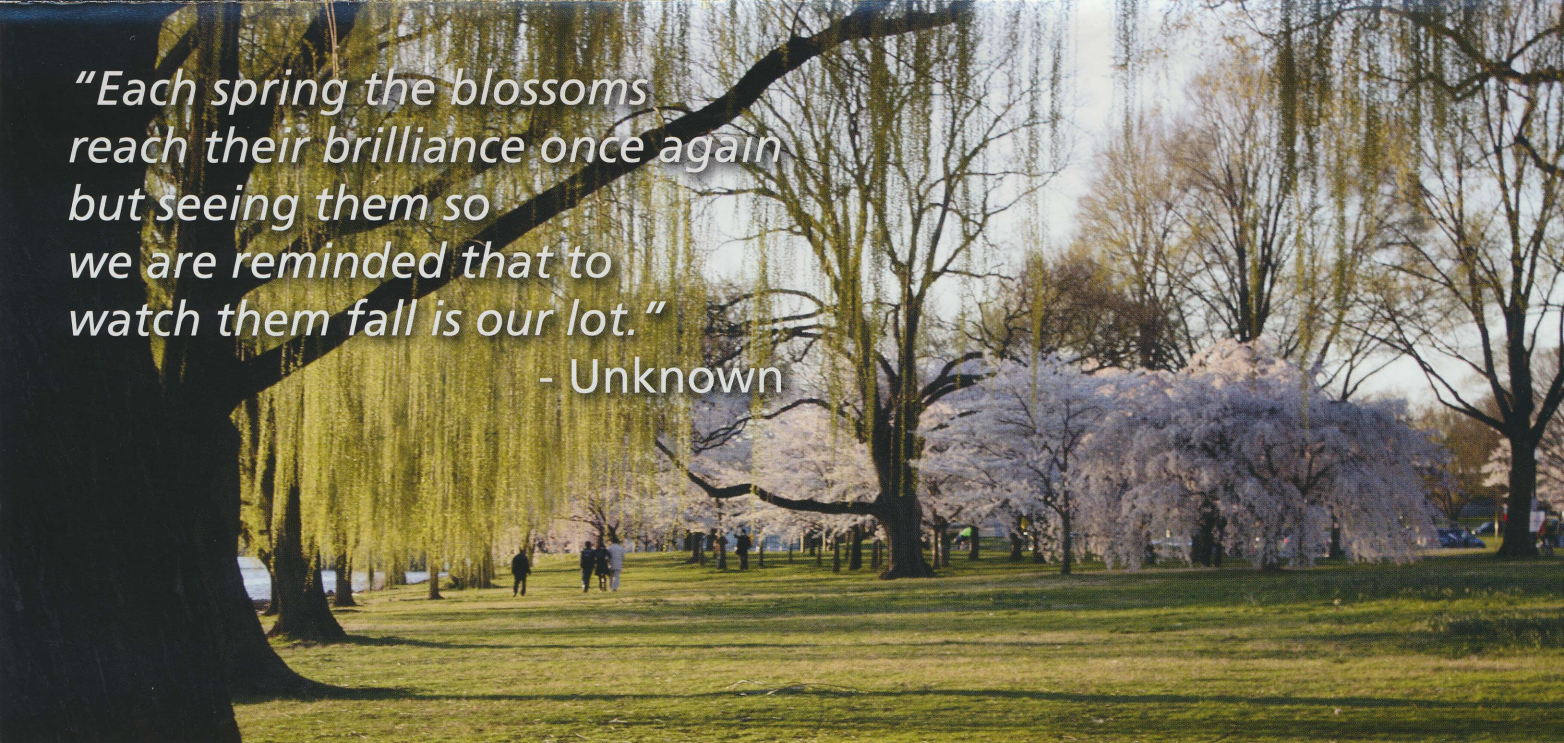
Beyond metaphors of life and death, Japanese culture links the blossoms with concepts as different as feminine mystique and the code of the warrior, and as complex as the interplay between youth's vigor and the wisdom of old age. "Cherry blossoms and trees," wrote Japanese theologian Awazuhara Atsushi, "will remind of ambiguous images in which opposites make a pair." With such diverse meanings, the cherry blossoms have something to offer everyone. Little wonder that we are drawn to the Japanese flowering cherry trees.

About the cover poem:

The cover poem may surprise some people because it is not an upbeat affirmation of the cherry blossoms' beauty. Instead, the poem recognizes the conflict between the charm of beauty and the knowledge of its loss.



Tidal Basin

A photograph of a park scene. In the foreground, a large, dark, gnarled tree trunk curves from the left side of the frame. Behind it, several tall, slender trees with long, drooping branches are covered in bright yellow-green blossoms. In the background, there are more trees, some with light pink or white blossoms, and a grassy area where a few people are walking. The sky is a pale, hazy blue.

*"Each spring the blossoms
reach their brilliance once again
but seeing them so
we are reminded that to
watch them fall is our lot."*

- Unknown

*"I take a new path this year on Mount Yoshino
to visit the blossoms in directions I have yet to see"*
- Saigyō

Ancient Tradition

For centuries, different philosophies and traditions have influenced and reinterpreted the Japanese flowering cherry trees, or *sakura*. Tracing their cultural significance through the ages reveals that cherry blossoms have held a special allure for a surprisingly long time.

Many people cite the connection between the cherry blossoms and the samurai as the root meaning of the cherry blossoms. The samurai adopted cherry blossoms as a symbol of their warrior caste in the 16th century, indicating that the warriors' life, like the existence of the blossoms, could be glorious, but brief. However, the cultural significance of the cherry blossoms has far deeper roots.

Long before the samurai association with cherry blossoms, there was already a Japanese word for cherry blossom viewing - *hanami*. Japanese nobility began holding *hanami* parties in the 9th century. The nobility imported the practice of *hanami* from China where it had focused on viewing plum blossoms. Plum trees flower earlier than cherry trees, the flower is more complex, and the fruit is edible, unlike that of the flowering cherry trees. Despite this, within a century Japanese flowering cherry trees replaced plum trees



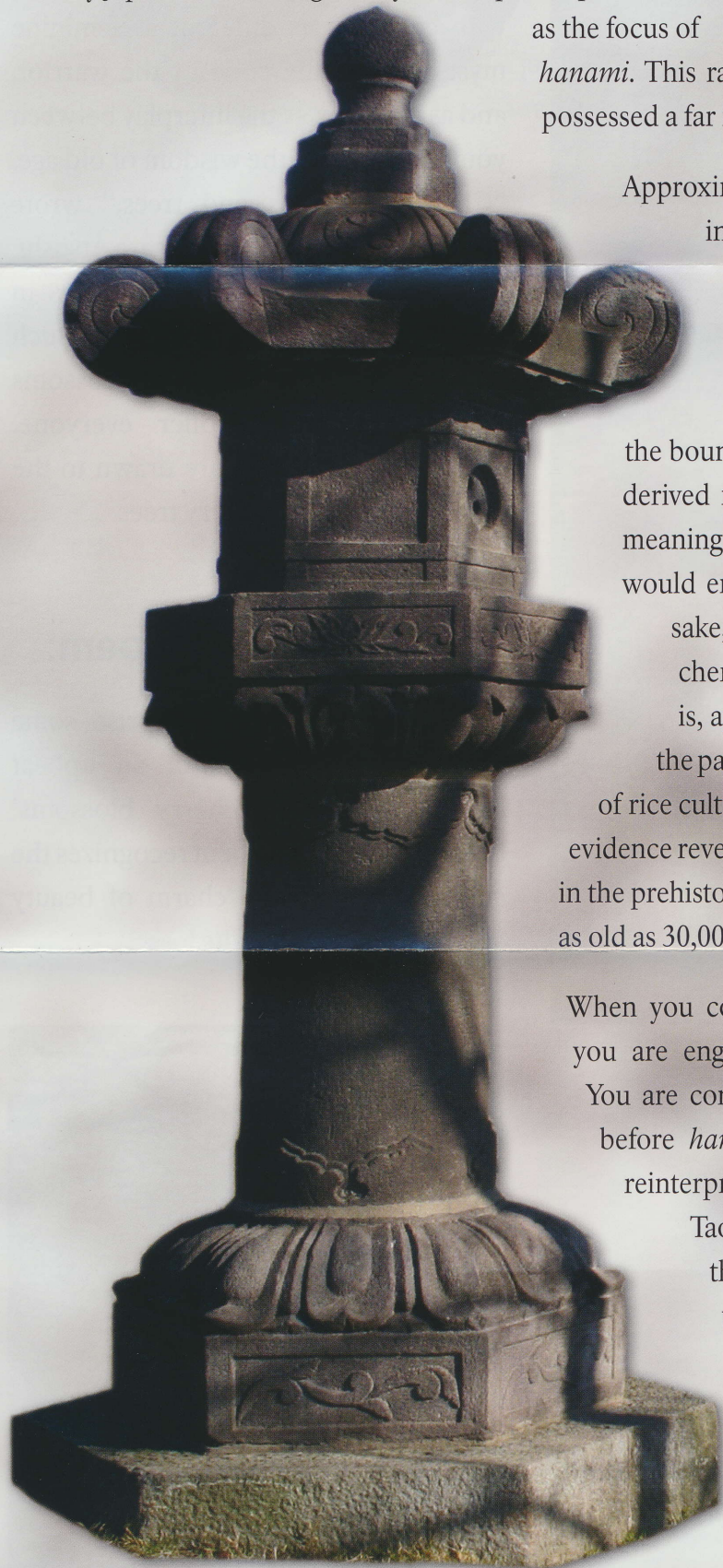
Thomas Jefferson Memorial

as the focus of

hanami. This rapid switch occurred because the Japanese already possessed a far more ancient reverence for *sakura* trees.

Approximately 2000 years ago, rice farming was introduced into Japan, and with it practices and beliefs referred to as “rice culture.” In this rice culture, the *sakura* blossoms were believed to be the houses of the rice harvest gods. The arrival of the blossoms and their duration guided planting and augured the bounty of the harvest. The word *sakura* is thought to be derived from *sagami*, “God of the Rice Fields,” and *kura*, meaning “seat, storehouse or vessel.” In ancient times, people would entice the rice gods from the *sakura* blossoms with sake, food, and dancing, strikingly similar to our modern cherry blossom festivities. This philosophy, ancient as it is, appears to have origins that extend even deeper into the past. Though *sakura* became entwined with the mythos of rice culture and the ancient religions of magic, archeological evidence reveals that cherry trees were already seen as divine even in the prehistoric hunting cultures of 13,000 years ago, and may be as old as 30,000 years.

When you come to view the Japanese flowering cherry trees, you are engaging in the 1000 year old practice of *hanami*. You are connecting with an even older rite that existed long before *hanami*. You are sharing a tradition that has been reinterpreted by the ancient philosophies of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Shintoism, yet predates them all. You are connected to distant ancestors by an unbroken thread stretching back to the Stone Age.



Japanese Stone Lantern



*"Sleeping under the trees on Yoshino mountain
The spring breeze wearing Cherry blossom petals"*

- Saigyo