
History of Japan's Unique Cherry Blossom Species and Flower-Loving Culture

Cherry blossoms, known as 'sakura' in Japanese, are iconic flowers of Japan, evoking a sense of the country for many people worldwide. Katsuki Toshio, from the Forestry and Forest Products Research Institute, has dedicated years to studying and conserving cherry blossoms. Here, he discusses the diverse varieties and unique characteristics of sakura found throughout Japan.

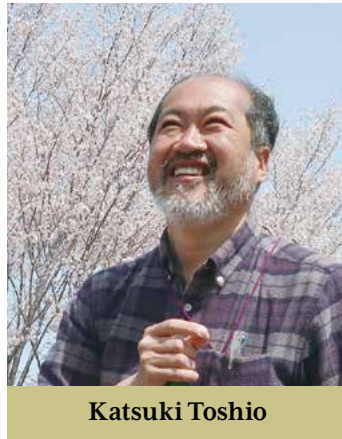
What are some of the typical ancient species of cherry blossoms found in Japan? And does Japan have a greater species of cherry blossom species than other countries?

There are 10 wild species of cherry blossoms native to Japan. Among them, the most common three species traditionally admired for their beauty include the Yama-zakura, followed by the Edo-higan, and the Oshima-zakura, which are representative of wild species.

There are approximately fifty to sixty species of cherry worldwide, primarily distributed in the temperate regions of the northern hemisphere, particularly in the cool temperate zone¹. Actually, North America has only two species, and Europe has only three to four species. Overwhelmingly, the majority

of cherry species are found in East Asia, with approximately thirty species in China alone. Given this distribution, it is reasonable to assume that cherry are associated with being flowers commonly seen in East Asia by people in Europe and North America.

Interestingly, overseas, the term "cherry" often refers to the sweet cherry, cultivated primarily for harvesting edible cherries. Even in China, cherry are not as commonly admired as ornamental flowers. Due to this distinction, in English, "cherry" typically denotes the fruit-bearing cherry tree, while cherry trees cultivated for ornamental purposes are referred to as 'flowering cherry' and similar terms.



Katsuki Toshio

The most commonly seen cultivar of cherry blossom today, 'Somei-yoshino', is said to be a relatively new cultivated breed. When was this cultivar born? Additionally, what types of cultivated cherry blossom cultivars exist in Japan, and approximately how many are there?

First, let me explain the history of cherry blossom cultivars in Japan. While it's true that wild cherry blossoms can be admired in their natural habitat, with the passage of time, there arose a desire for cultivars that were both more exquisite in appearance and easier to cultivate. This demand led to the emergence of cherry blossom cultivars.

The oldest cherry blossom cultivar is 'Pendula' (weeping cherry), with records of its cultivation dating back to the 10th to 11th century. Even today, very old 'Pendula' trees, which have been cultivated since that time, can still be found in tourist spots across the country, likely dating back over a thousand years. I believe Japanese can be very proud of the fact that Japanese 'Pendula' has such a long history worldwide.

From the 13th century, there was a rapid increase in visually striking cultivars resulting from the hybridization of Oshima-zakura and Yama-zakura. At that



Photo: Katsuki Toshio

The Kumano-zakura (Kumano cherry) discovered by Katsuki Toshio



Left: The Yama-zakura blooms with white petals and red leaves simultaneously.

Center: The Edohigan blooms before its leaves emerge and is characterized by a swollen floral cup at the base of each flower.

Right: The Oshima-zakura has large flowers around 3 to 5 cm in size, and its leaves bud simultaneously with flowering.



Above: 'Somei-yoshino' grows quickly and can adapt to various environments. Today, it is widely planted across Japan as park and roadside trees. A distinctive feature is its tendency to bloom before the leaves emerge.
Right: 'Albo-rosea'



'Sekiyama', a cultivated double-flowering cherry blossom variety.

time, cherry blossoms were mainly confined to the gardens of the upper class, with the public only able to admire them from afar. However, by the 17th century, a trend resembling today's *hanami* (flower viewing) had emerged, as people deliberately set aside spaces to plant cherry blossoms for the express purpose of enjoying them.

'Somei-Yoshino' originated in the mid-19th century when residents of Somei village in Edo (now part of Toshima City, Tokyo) began selling a cultivar they named Yoshino-zakura, inspired by Mount Yoshino, a well-known site for Yama-zakura in present-day Nara Prefecture. Believed to be a hybrid of the Edohigan and Oshima-zakura cultivar, the 'Somei-yoshino' has been in existence for approximately 200 years. In other words, compared to cultivar like 'Shidarezakura', which have a history of over 1000 years, or double-flowering cultivars like 'Sekiyama' or 'Alboreosa', which have been cultivated for over 400 years, 'Somei-yoshino' can therefore be considered relatively new.

Due to the affection for cherry blossoms in Japan, there are currently over 100 cultivars of cherry blossoms, including 'Pendula' and 'Somei-yoshino'.

During the Heian period (late 8th to late 12th century), cherry blossoms make appearances in various



'Pendula' at present-day Daigo-ji Temple

classical literature works such as *The Tale of Genji*. Are these primarily referring to the Yama-zakura? In addition, while many renowned persons in Japanese history admired cherry blossoms, could you tell us what kind of cherry blossoms they preferred?

The cherry blossoms depicted in classical literature, which people of that time would have seen, are likely Yama-zakura. However, there are accounts suggesting that Edohigan were also present during the historical cherry blossom-viewing party² held at Daigo-ji Temple by Toyotomi Hideyoshi³. I believe that during Hideyoshi's era, the Oshima-zakura was also present in Kyoto, so these three kinds were likely visible. Furthermore, in *Takekawa* ("bamboo river" in Japanese), the 44th chapter of *The Tale of Genji*⁴, cherry blossoms are depicted with white flowers and red leaves, suggesting that they are likely Yama-zakura. Moreover, in old paintings, if the depiction of the flowers and branches is accurate, we can identify the species of cherry blossom. However, in reality, distinguishing between them skillfully is quite challenging, and it can be difficult to identify the species from past literature and paintings.

In Japan, the tradition of cherry blossom viewing, known as *hanami*, dates to the Heian period. However, in ancient times, there were many seasonal traditions, such as New Year's visits to shrines, Japanese apricot blossoms in early spring, and wisteria in early summer. The tradition of cherry blossom viewing began to stand out distinctly, possibly around the late 19th century. The groundwork for this was laid around the 17th century. During the Edo period (early 17th century to mid-late 19th century), what we might now call mini-trips, where commoners in Edo (present-day Tokyo) ventured out together to famous cherry blossom viewing spots such as Ueno's Kaneiji Temple, Sumida River's embankment, and Asukayama

Park⁵, gave rise to a culture of communal gatherings and feasting. And in the mid-19th century, the emergence of ‘Somei-yoshino’ also contributed to this trend. ‘Somei-yoshino’ grow quickly, allowing for the creation of cherry blossom viewing spots with minimal effort, which greatly contributed to the popularization of *hanami*. Also, with the development of transportation networks such as railways, individuals could journey longer distances, facilitating large gatherings at cherry blossom viewing spots. *Hanami* gained widespread popularity from the late 19th century onward as a result.

In 2018, the discovery of a new species called Kumano-zakura was published, marking the first such discovery in about a century. If you have any cherry blossom species that hold a special place in your heart, please share them with us.

Certainly, for me, the Kumano-zakura stands out as the most beautiful and memorable cherry blossom species. My fascination with cherry blossoms truly began when I started studying them, and the encounter with Kumano-zakura left the deepest impression on me. I highly recommend experiencing the blossoms firsthand in the Kumano region (part of Wakayama and Mie Prefectures)⁶, where they were discovered. The petals boast a delicate pink color, and the flowers themselves are smaller than ‘Somei-yoshino’. They bloom sparsely, with slender and gently swaying branches. When describing them to others, I often liken them to a shrine maiden⁷ deep in the mountains, evoking a sense of grace and elegance. In contrast, ‘Somei-yoshino’ resembles an urban superstar, radiating a sparkling and glamorous aura.

In the future, I would like to research the hypothesis that the renowned medieval poet Fujiwara no Teika⁸, who was active in Japan’s Middle Ages, actually admired the Kumano-zakura. During this era, pilgrimage to Kumano⁹ was popular, so I believe there is



A large single cherry tree of Kumano-zakura growing naturally in the Kumano River basin

a strong possibility that when visiting Kumano dozens of times, Teika had the opportunity to see the flowers of Kumano cherry. It’s an idea I would like to look into.

Please share some recommended locations where tourists from overseas can enjoy Japan’s traditional cherry blossoms.

In Tokyo, I highly recommend visiting Shinjuku Gyoen¹⁰ for its convenient accessibility. For people wanting to see traditional Japanese landscapes adorned with cherry blossoms, Mt. Yoshino in Nara Prefecture is an excellent choice. Until around the 17th century, it was customary for commoners to admire Yama-zakura in the mountains, making places where this tradition remains today particularly precious. Additionally, if you venture beyond the mountains of Yoshino, you’ll reach Kumano, where I also suggest experiencing the enchanting Kumano-zakura. Make sure to explore the Kumano area for an authentic cherry blossom viewing experience. Kumano-zakura earlier than ‘Somei-yoshino’, typically reaching full bloom in mid-March. **¶**

1. The climatic zone bordering on the subarctic within the temperate zone.
 2. A cherry blossom viewing party held by Toyotomi Hideyoshi in 1598 at Sanbōin in Daigo-ji Temple, Kyoto, during his final years.
 3. (1536 or 1537 – 1598) Born into humble beginnings, he ascended to become a military commander, later a regent and Grand Minister, solidifying the Toyotomi regime.
 4. A long narrative tale written by Murasaki Shikibu comprising 54 chapters, it is a classic of Japanese literature and globally renowned.
 5. Famous cherry blossom viewing spots in Tokyo. Ueno’s Kaneiji Temple is in Taito City, the Sumida River embankment is in Sumida City, and Asukayama Park is in Kita City.
 6. The Kumano Sanzan, a set of three grand shrines (Kumano Hongu Taisha, Kumano Hayatama Taisha, and Kumano Nachi Taisha), along with the Kumano Kodo pilgrimage routes leading to

them in the Kumano region, were registered as UNESCO World Heritage Sites in 2004.
 7. A woman who belongs to a shrine, assists the priests, and serves in specific Shinto rituals.
 8. Born in 1162 and died in 1241, and also known as Fujiwara no Sadaie, he was a poet, poetry scholar, and classical scholar of the early Kamakura period, which lasted from 1185 to 1333. He played a prominent role as a leader in the poetry world and is one of the compilers of the *Shin Kokin Wakashū*, an imperial anthology of waka poetry. He is famous for compiling the *Hyakunin Isshu*, a classical Japanese anthology of one hundred Japanese waka by one hundred poets.
 9. Also refers to pilgrimage to the Kumano Sanzan (described in Note 7 above).
 10. One of the national parks managed by the Ministry of the Environment located in Shinjuku Ward, Tokyo.