



Photo: Motobu Tourism Association

Mount Yaedake, in the northern region of Okinawa Island, is famous for its Ryukyu Kanhi-zakura cherry blossoms. The blooming season provides beautiful scenery with a gradation of pink shades.

# Ryukyu Kanhi-zakura Cherry Blossoms, Beloved in Okinawa as an Early Sign of Spring



Photo: PXTA

Ryukyu Kanhi-zakura blooms in a downward direction.

In the warm Okinawa Prefecture, (hereinafter, “Okinawa”) cherry blossoms typically bloom from late January to February each year. In line with this flowering period, cherry blossom festivals are held at various locations throughout the prefecture. We spoke to an official from the Motobu Tourism Association, which holds the Motobu Yaedake Cherry Blossom Festival.

(Text: Kurosawa Akane)

The cherry blossoms (‘sakura’ in Japanese<sup>1</sup>), in Okinawa, located at the southwest of the Japanese archipelago, belong to a variety known as Kanhi-zakura. The name ‘Kanhi-zakura’ originates from the reddish scarlet (*hiiro*<sup>2</sup>) color of its blossoms, which bloom from the cold season. In Okinawa, it is known as Ryukyu Kanhi-zakura, named after Okinawa’s alternate name, Ryukyu. The renowned spot for Ryukyu Kanhi-zakura is Mount Yaedake, the second-highest peak on Okinawa Island<sup>3</sup> with an ele-

vation of 453 meters. Each year, from January, the Motobu Yaedake Cherry Blossom Festival takes place at Sakura-no-Mori Park on the slopes of Mount Yaedake. Renowned as Japan’s earliest cherry blossom festival, it is an event that many people enjoy.

“The base of the Mount Yaedake spans from the northern part of Okinawa Island, through the towns of Motobu and Nago. Approximately 7,000 Ryukyu Kanhi-zakura cherry trees lining the roadside for over four kilometers leading to its summit,” explains



Touyama Kiyohiro from the Motobu Tourism Association. “This area is the earliest blooming region in Okinawa. Ryukyu Kanhi-zakura cherry blossoms are known for their vibrant, deep pink flowers, which charmingly bloom in a downward direction.”

The Ryukyu Kanhi-zakura is beloved in Okinawa as an early sign of spring. These cherry blossoms can be enjoyed up close or admired from afar as they adorn the entire mountain. The contrast between their vibrant scarlet colors and the lush greenery of the primeval forest is truly a sight to behold. During the cherry blossom festival season, many people gather at Mount Yaedake to enjoy the cherry blossoms. They drive along the roadside, which stretches for over four kilometers, or take a leisurely stroll to admire the cherry blossoms.

“In 2024, the Motobu Yaedake Cherry Blossom Festival (held from January 20 to February 4) attracted approximately 150,000 visitors not only from Okinawa Prefecture but also from across the country. Additionally, it is estimated that overseas visitors accounted for roughly 10% of the total attendance,” says Touyama. “Mount Yaedake, the second-highest peak on Okinawa Island, experiences variations in elevation, resulting in delayed blooming at higher, cooler altitudes. As a result, visitors can enjoy the cherry blossoms for an extended period.”

In Japan, the tradition of *hanami*, or flower viewing, typically involves laying out mats under cherry blossom trees and enjoying outdoor small banquets with food and drinks. This iconic springtime activity is commonly observed in parks throughout Tokyo. Sometimes the banquet is the main event. “In the car-oriented society of Okinawa, people enjoy the cherry blossoms from the car while driving. There are numerous tree-lined roadsides with stunning cherry blossoms,” says Toyama. Cherry blossoms are an early sign of spring in Okinawa, offering an excellent chance to experience the beauty and arrival of the season for yourself. 📷



Photo: Motobu Tourism Association

The captivating contrast between the vibrant pink of the Ryukyu Kanhi-zakura cherry blossoms and the lush greenery of the mountain's primeval forest

1. The different varieties of cherry blossom often end in '-zakura' such as Kanhi-zakura, due to the phonetic change in Japanese.
2. One of the traditional colors passed down through Japan since ancient times, referring to a deep and bright shade of red.
3. In Okinawa Prefecture, there are 691 islands according to data from the Geospatial Information Authority of Japan (as of January 2022). Okinawa Island refers to the largest, which is home to the central city of Naha.



Photo: PIXTA

Approximately 7,000 Ryukyu Kanhi-zakura cherry trees stand in full bloom along the road stretching for over four kilometers leading to the summit of Mount Yaedake.