

## ENVIRONMENT & TRAVEL

### Washington DC's national cherry blossom festival

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**In March and April 2006, Washington DC and hordes of tourists celebrate pale-pink cherry blossoms for the 94th time.**



In early 1912, over 3000 cherry trees of 12 different varieties were successfully shipped from Yokohama to Washington DC. The wife of the Japanese Ambassador to the USA and First Lady Taft planted two of them around the Tidal Basin in Washington, near the Jefferson Memorial. These two original trees are still standing today and bronze plaques at the bases of the trees commemorate the occasion. Since then, the citizens of Washington have continued planting cherry trees around the Tidal Basin and their fleeting beauty remains a testimony to the enduring friendship of the two countries. Many of the cherry trees in Tokyo that were planted to replace those destroyed during World War II are actually the cuttings of the trees along the Tidal Basin. The National Cherry Blossom Festival began in March 1954 when the Japanese Ambassador commemorated the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the peace treaty between the United States and Japan.

Other Cherry Blossom festivals have since sprung up throughout the country since with celebrations in Macon (Georgia) or in San Francisco (California)... But the capital's festival remains the most popular one at home and abroad. Year after year hundreds of thousands of visitors from across the nation and around the world come to the Capital to witness the spectacle, hoping that the trees will be on time for the Cherry Blossom Festival. These hordes of tourists, Japanese and others, are a real boon for the city but also a real challenge when it comes to logistics.

During March and April, flights from Tokyo are packed and US blossom tours mushroom. In Japan the tradition goes back to the eighth century and is called the Sakura Matsuri. Praying and banquetting under the cherry trees celebrates the fertility of the earth and marks the changing of the seasons. Dancing, singing and drinking sake or beer are customary. But in DC, National Park Service regulations forbid alcohol consumption in the park, so that sheer numbers aside, differences in cultural traditions are clearly an issue.

Organisers of the Festival are doing their best to communicate but they have only twenty Japanese speakers whereas they would need dozens more. Fortunately, the Festival's official bilingual website answers such vital questions as "When will the cherry blossom trees bloom?" "Do the cherry blossom trees produce cherries?" "I want to plan a large picnic or wedding under the cherry blossom trees. What do I need to do?" "Can I bring my dog with me to the Tidal basin?" and finally "How can I get my own cherry blossom tree?"

Sources: "Beyond the Blossoms, a Language Barrier Grows," *The Washington Post* 20 march 2006.

"Cherry Blossom Festival entices Japanese," *USA today* 27 march 2006.

Official website of the Festival : <http://www.nationalcherryblossomfestival.org/>

Historical background : <http://www.nps.gov/nacc/cherry/history.htm/>