

# The Cherry Blossoms Blooming Friendship Between Japan and the United States

The cherry trees along the banks of the Potomac, blooming every year in late March and early April, are emblematic of spring in Washington DC. The roughly 4,000 trees are a treasure enjoyed by residents and visitors alike. The National Cherry Blossom Festival, which dates back to 1927, now attracts over 1.5 million people every year. It is a huge social occasion that brings everyone together, and the root of this “cherry blossom diplomacy” was one Japanese man: Jokichi Takamine.

Takamine was a biologist, best known for discovering the enzyme takadiastase and the hormone adrenalin. At the age of thirty-six he emigrated to the United States, and until his death at the age of sixty-eight he continued his research in the United States. Because of his many accomplishments, he is sometimes called the “father of modern biotechnology.”

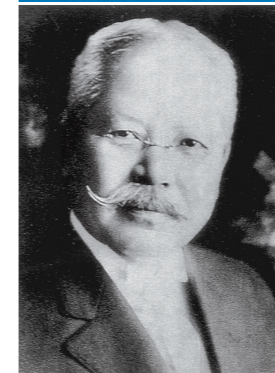
Cherry trees were first brought to Washington DC over 100 years ago. In 1909, First Lady Helen Taft had the idea of planting cherry trees along the banks of the Potomac, which Takamine enthusiastically supported. He made an appeal to the mayor of Tokyo, Yukio Ozaki, to bring beautiful cherry trees, the symbol of Japan, to the United States. In the following year, with the cooperation of the city of Tokyo and funding from Takamine’s own pocket, approximately 2,000 cherry trees were presented to Washington DC. Unfortunately, however, just before planting, a quarantine inspection revealed that the trees were infested and they were all incinerated. But Takamine did not give up; two years later, in 1912, another 6,000 trees were procured in Japan and arrived safely in the United States; half of those were delivered in Washington DC. This was the beginning of the famous cherry trees of Washington DC.

Today, about 100 of those original trees are still standing, including the very first one, planted by First Lady Helen Taft herself. Typically, cherry trees live about 70 years, but the trees in Washington DC have been very well managed under conditions very suitable for their preservation. Takamine’s cherry trees and their descendants have graced the shores of the Potomac for a century or more.

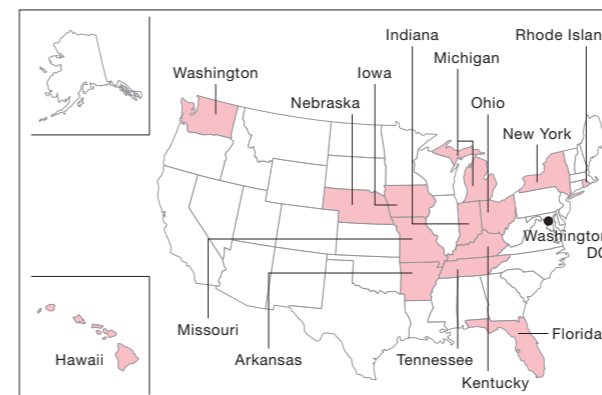
The movie director, Toru Ichikawa, who made a film about Takamine on location in America, said:

When the infestation of the original cherry trees was discovered, some newspapers in the United States had some very harsh things to say, creating a difficult situation. But Takamine’s motto was “try, try again.” He was not daunted by this criticism, and he fought to bring another batch of Japanese cherry trees to America. As a result, his cherry trees are loved by many Americans as a symbol of Japan-the United States friendship. It is fair to say that the “diplomacy of flowers” has borne great fruit.

This tale of the gifted flowers has a second chapter. In 1915, three years after the Japanese trees were successfully introduced, the United States government sent a gift to the city of Tokyo: seeds and saplings of dogwood, considered a symbol of America. These were the first dogwoods ever to be planted in Japan. Like the cherry trees of Washington DC, to this day they are beloved by many people in Japan as a symbol of spring.



## SAKURA PROJECT



In 2012, to mark the centennial of Japan’s gift of cherry trees to the United States, cherry tree planting projects were launched in fourteen U.S. states (Rhode Island, New York, Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, Iowa, Missouri, Arkansas, Nebraska, Florida, Washington, and Hawaii), with the cooperation of twenty organizations.



1. The most popular spots for a snapshot on the banks of the Potomac River have cherry trees with the Jefferson Memorial in the background.(photo by Aflo) 2. Jokichi Takamine (1854-1922) is known as one of Japan’s ten greatest inventors for his discoveries of the enzyme takadiastase and the hormone adrenalin.(photo by Dr.Jokichi Takamine Kenshokai) 3. In 1915, dogwood trees were sent from America in thanks for Japan’s gift of cherry trees. This episode of international exchange was highlighted in middle-school English textbooks in Japan (revised in 1981).(photo by Aflo) 4. Every year, more than 1.5 million people visit the National Cherry Blossom Festival. The crowning event of the three-week festival is the parade, with marching bands, giant balloons, hip-hop dancers and other entertainments. (National Cherry Blossom Festival Parade®)