

Looking beyond the beloved Yoshino cherry tree

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FULL TEXT

The Japanese flowering cherry trees now in serene flower around the Tidal Basin are, for the most part, clones of a single plant favored in 19th-century Tokyo and named Somei-Yoshino.

It is easy to see their appeal; the blossoms each consist of a simple, creamy collar of silken petals around a yellow stamen. They seem pure and natural, even if they are the end product of centuries of hybridizing in Japan.

The tree canopies spread agreeably with age, and by blooming in unison (as clones) they create an enchanting blush-white cloud that floats above the water. When they are done, they fall in an extended shower of confetti that is nothing short of magical.

This monocultural artistic effect comes with some risk: If you plant the genetically identical plant en masse, you are raising the risk of it being wiped out by a new pest or disease. But that view is probably too dire; on paper cherry trees are beset with all manner of pernicious maladies, and yet they survive. The biggest threat to the Potomac Park cherry trees is us; all those feet squash the life out of the soil and the roots.

The short-lived blossoms are viewed in their native land as a symbol of the fleeting nature of our lives. The challenge of the Tidal Basin Yoshinos is in trying to meditate on this profundity in the company of thousands of other cherry-peepers. Many are, no doubt, sensitive types seeking a soulful experience, but others lack introspective sensibilities, and some believe an experience is only real if it is seen through the veil of a smartphone.

On balance, the hordes are all to the good. The greater the number of people connecting to nature, the better the prospects for the planet, I say.

And it is not just in Washington where mass plantings of trees produce appreciative crowds. In her new book, "The Sakura Obsession," Naoko Abe recounts the ritual of cherry-viewing or *hanami*. Her journalist colleagues in Tokyo would send an assistant to stake out a spot under the trees in the afternoon, and by the evening, they had joined him for a raucous, sake-fueled celebration. Across the land, millions do the same.

In the former German capital of Bonn, tourists clog the old city each April to enjoy the tree-lined boulevards, to the consternation of some locals. Last year, according to reports, an anonymous Grinch threatened to vandalize the trees if people didn't put down their phones and start enjoying the flowers. Is this the opposite of *schadenfreude*? From a gardener's perspective, the surfeit of Yoshinos means we may be missing out on all the other Japanese flowering cherry tree selections, hybrids and varieties that are waiting to please us. Some of these cherries, I point out, are inferior to Yoshino. The weeping ones grafted high on a cherry stick live up to their name. When I see one, I want to weep.

More than 10 percent of the trees in Potomac Park are of the mid-April flowering Kwanzan or Kanzan cherry, which to my mind is a dud: too coarse in structure, too blowzy in its double flower, too strong in color. The flower effect is diluted by the burgeoning foliage. If the Yoshino draws us to the Elysian fields, the Kwanzan barks the penny arcade.

If I were to plant a cherry tree, I might pick Accolade, a hybrid between the Sargent and Higan cherry that is vigorous and yet delicate in its blushed, semi-double blossoms.

In recent years at the National Arboretum, the late Don Egolf and his successor, Margaret Pooler, have produced several attractive cherry trees, all with some parentage in the Taiwan cherry, *Prunus campanulata*. This species is

striking; the blooms are bell-like and a rich magenta, but it is not reliably hardy north of North Carolina. Its offspring are tougher and can be widely planted.

Dream Catcher is more upright in habit than Yoshino (useful for small urban gardens) and as a seedling selection of the Okame cherry blooms earlier, as well.

Helen Taft, named after the first lady behind the Tidal Basin plantings, is a cross between the Yoshino and Taiwan cherries. It blooms at the very threshold of spring and is smothered in pale pink single blossoms that darken after a few days.

First Lady, another in the series, is strongly upright with dark glossy leaves and abundant dark rose-pink blooms redolent of the Taiwan cherry. This hybrid, which grows to 27 feet high and 14 feet across after 20 years, has proven the most popular, Pooler says.

The reliance on Yoshino is understandable, given its grace, and it has mesmerized not just Washington. In major public plantings in postwar Japan, the Yoshino became predominant. Abe is not entirely happy with this. In her book she points out that some 400 varieties of cherry have been bred from a handful of species over the past 1,200 years. Most of the world knew nothing of these beauties until Japan opened to the West in the mid-19th century. Suddenly confronted with these treasures, cities such as Washington naturally went crazy for them.

She recounts almost 50 cherry varieties. Her beef isn't with Yoshinos, per se, but the fact that a militarized Japan in the 1920s and 1930s co-opted the plant as a symbol of noble death in the service of a belligerent state. On the eve of their mission, kamikaze pilots would get together and sing "Doki no Sakura" - Cherry Blossom Brothers. But the book's main and happier thrust is the recognition of an English plantsman - Collingwood Ingram - who became a noted guardian of the Japanese flowering cherry from his garden in Kent. He introduced some 50 varieties to the West and bred the Okame cherry tree, favored for its upright habit and early flowering. Perhaps his greatest feat was in preserving the Great White cherry and returning it to Japan, where it was known as Taihaku and then lost to cultivation. It is noted for its large, single white blossoms.

His initial efforts to send scions to Japan failed - they arrived dried out and dead. But he sent another batch embedded in potatoes, and they survived. There you have it, an Englishman using a South American tuber to restore an ancient Asian cherry to its homeland. That has to be a message about the power of the cherry tree to bring people together. The same cherry blossom dance is afoot, joyfully, this week on the banks of the Potomac.

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