



Township of Bernards Shade Tree Commission

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Cherry Trees (*Prunus species*)

The U. S. tradition of planting hundreds or even thousands of cherry trees dates back to 1885 when Eliza Scidmore was impressed with the beauty of the flowering cherries on a visit to Japan. On return, she began to promote the idea of planting large groves of Japanese cherries in the Washington, DC parks. At first the government showed little interest in her suggestion, but some individuals imported trees for their gardens and this piqued the interest of others in the area. David Fairchild bought 1000 trees and planted them in Chevy Chase, MD and later donated saplings to DC schools in recognition of Arbor Day. Fairchild also suggested a "field of cherries" be planted in what is now known as the tidal basin. Meanwhile Eliza Scidmore wrote a letter to Helen Taft, the wife of the newly elected president Howard Taft, promoting Fairchild's idea. This led to the purchase of 90 cherry trees that were planted along the Potomac River. Via diplomatic channels a donation of 2000 cherry trees was made by Japan's capital city, Tokyo, as a sign of friendship with the US. This first shipment in 1910 of 2000 trees was seriously affected by various insect and disease problems and was removed and burned. In 1912 the Japanese government shipped a new batch of 3020 cherry trees, consisting of eight different cultivars, to replace the original shipment. These trees were planted in Tidal Basin in West Potomac Park.

The annual Cherry Tree Festival in Washington, DC is now an important spring event and a tourist attraction. The predicted bloom time is widely publicized each year so that visitors may see the flowers at their best bloom period.

The idea of mass cherry tree planting spread throughout America and the largest collection is at Branch Brook Park here in NJ. This park was created by the Essex County Park Commission in 1895 and contains 4,300 cherry trees of 14 different varieties. Originally 60 acres, the park expanded to its current 360 acres from gifts by the Ballantine family and other wealthy Newark families. The landscape

architectural firm was the Olmstead brothers, whose father designed many city parks. The park contains many significant buildings, bridges, gates, and sculptures many of which were designed by the architectural firm Carrère and Hastings. The cherry trees were a gift from Caroline Bamberger Fuld in 1927.

In the surrounding area the double flowering variety of cherry (*Prunus serrulata* 'Kwanzan') is planted extensively. It blooms about two weeks later than many other cherries and is less affected by cold spring weather. This cultivar is popular also because clear pink flowers that bloom before the tree leafs out, good fall color, and lack of fruit. Significant insect and disease problems limit its life to only 15 to 25 years. It is vase shaped and typically grows 25 to 30 feet tall and wide.

A very popular flowering cherry is 'Okame' , a cross between *Prunus incisa* x *Prunus campanulata*. It bears deep pink flowers in early spring and is not as blossom hardy as 'Kwanzan'. It is often chosen because of its better hardiness among other cherries here in our zone 6 climate and is extensively planted at Branch Brook Park.

The weeping Higan cherry (*Prunus* x *Snow Fountains*) is an outstanding small weeping tree that blooms in April. Prolific white flowers cover the tree, hence its name that connotes a cascading snowfall. It is compact growing making it very suitable for a small and more intimate landscape.

A common weeping pink flowering form of the Higan cherry is *Prunus subhirtella* 'Pendula'. Weeping cherry trees are often grafted five to six feet high onto the non-weeping species, called under stock. Sometimes the under stock itself sprouts along the trunk or at the graft union and needs to be promptly removed to maintain the weeping character of the tree. It's hardy to zone 5, but is affected by many insect and disease problems and doesn't last long in the landscape. Older trees may grow to 20 to 40 feet high and 25 to thirty feet wide.