

THE NATIONAL FLOWER OF JAPAN “SAKURA”

Spring is the Hanami season in Japan.

■ By Teri Mitchell



Sakura in full bloom

Hanami (花見, literally means “flower viewing”) is the Japanese traditional custom of enjoying the beauty of flowers. “Flower”, in this case, almost always means Sakura (cherry blossoms) or Ume (plum) blossoms. From late March to early April, Sakura go into full bloom all over Japan. The blossom forecast (桜前線, “Sakura Zensen” or “cherry blossom front”) is announced each year by the weather bureau, and is watched carefully by those planning Hanami as the blossoms only last a week.

Sakura starts to bloom in February and ends in May. The peak time varies depending on the area in Japan. For example, in Okinawa which is the biggest Japanese Southern island, the Hanami season is in January - February, in Hokkaido which is the most Northern part of Japan, it is in May.



Sumida River in Tokyo

In Tokyo area, it is March - April.

Crowds of people - families, groups of friends, and groups from companies sit under the fully open cherry blossoms, usually on plastic tarps, and have a picnic celebration. The picnic fare consists of a wide variety of foods, Sake (rice wine), beer, or other drinks. The activities often include dancing and Karaoke in addition to the cherry blossom viewing.

In very popular places such as Ueno Park and Aoyama Cemetery in Tokyo, the competition for prime picnic spots is intense. Company groups and family members claim spots by arriving very early in the morning and sitting all day long until the real celebrations begin in the evening. It is not unusual to see a young man in a business suit sitting under a cherry tree early in the morning re-



Sakura and Osaka Castle

serving a space for his company. The new employees are traditionally given this job of sitting all day long to reserve space for the company celebration.

In Japan, April is the beginning of the school year as well as the business financial year. Since the Heian Period (794-1185) flower-viewing parties were popular among the aristocracy. In the Azuchi Momoyama Period (1568-1600) the cherry blossom viewing spread out to the rest of the population.

Hanami is a very essential feature of seasonal events in Japan.

Amazingly, you can even enjoy Sakura in the U.S. We have many Sakura trees around Jefferson Memorial in Washington D.C. Those trees were gifts from Japan in 1910.

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