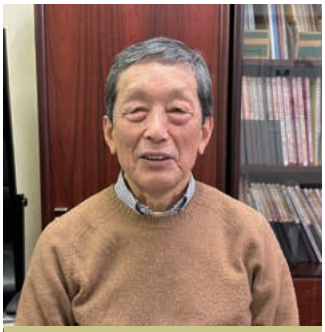
# The History and Charm of Cherry Blossoms Decorating Famous Castles in Spring

**Of all the cherry blossom scenes that make spring so special in Japan, the beauty of those surrounding a castle is beyond description. We interviewed ASADA Nobuyuki, Secretary-General of the Japan Cherry Blossom Association, and a tree doctor, about the historical background to the planting of cherry trees at castles in Japan and some of the highlights for viewing.**



**ASADA Nobuyuki**

Secretary-General of the Japan Cherry Blossom Association, established in 1964. The organization works to plant and preserve cherry trees and conducts international friendship exchange activities involving cherry trees.

**Please tell us about the Japan Cherry Blossom Association, of which you are Secretary-General.**

The Japan Cherry Blossom Association was founded in 1964. This was during the period of rapid economic growth from the 1960s to the 1970s, when Japan saw large-scale urban development and infrastructure projects, and parks and rivers were being actively developed. Many cherry trees were also cut down in preparation for the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games. This is why the Association got started, with the aim of preserving the cherry trees that had been planted from the late 19th century through the early 20th century. We also do publicity work to introduce famous cherry blossom viewing spots throughout Japan on the list of Japan's Top 100 Cherry Blossom Viewing Sites.

**Many places in Japan are known as famous cherry blossom viewing spots. Especially popular among and loved by the Japanese people are cherry blossoms in parks built at castles and castle ruins. Such parks are included in Japan's Top 100 Cherry Blossom Viewing Sites selected by the Japan Cherry Blossom Association. Please tell us about the history**

Photo: Himeji City

Himeji Castle's white castle tower (also called "keep") and cherry blossoms in full bloom go together beautifully (Himeji City, Hyogo Prefecture)

Photo: PIXTA

One can enjoy viewing cherry blossoms in a sea of clouds at the Takeda Castle Ruins in Asago City, Hyogo Prefecture, which are built on top of a 353.7-meter-high mountain.

**and circumstances of how castles and castle ruins came to be widely popular with Japanese people as cherry blossom viewing spots.**

First of all, cherry blossoms were a valuable partner in life to the Japanese as an agricultural people, as they signaled the start of the farming season. Especially in cold regions, their blooming was an important clue about the timing for avoiding damage due to late frosts.[1] Perhaps these ancient memories give the Japanese people a special feeling when they see cherry blossoms. During the Edo period (from the early 16th century to the mid-late 19th century), there was also a culture of competition for producing specialty flowers as offerings to the Tokugawa shoguns, which gave rise to a rich variety of cherry blossoms. Today, from 300 to 500 varieties[2] exist.

The history behind the planting of cherry trees at castles and castle ruins can be traced back to the late 19th century, when the Tokugawa Shogunate was replaced by the Meiji government, and the Castle Abolition Order[3] was implemented as part of a series of measures to abolish the feudal system that had been in place until then. Since castles in Japan were originally military sites, in order to protect the stone walls from damage, they did not plant trees with roots that would spread deeply into the ground. It is also thought that it would have been very difficult for trees and other vegetation to take root in their firm and solid foundations.

However, I think the main reasons why cherry trees are planted at castles and castle ruins is to commemorate them, to create a wonderful contrast between the stone walls and the blossoms, and to use precedent and the scenery as a model for planting new cherry trees. I also think that the fact that the *Somei Yoshino* cherry, which is relatively strong and easy to grow, and was supplied in large amounts from the 2nd half of the 19th century, also encouraged this practice. For example, Hirosaki Park on the site of Hirosaki Castle is now famous for its 2,600 cherry trees including the main *Somei Yoshino* trees, but the *Yama-zakura* mountain cherry trees from Kyoto that were initially planted there did not grow well. The emergence of the *Somei Yoshino*, which is relatively strong and easy to plant in castles and castle ruins, was probably a major factor. Moreover, since cherry trees put down very deep roots, they require sufficient space for planting, and it was easy to secure large areas for planting them at castles and castle ruins.

The amount of space required for cherry trees depends on the region. Since Japan is long from north to south, *Somei Yoshino* tree diameters in the cold Tohoku region[4] are 15 to 20 meters, while those in the warmer Tokai-Kinki region[5] are about 10 meters. Well-drained soil is also important for cherry tree growth. Clay soil will prevent the roots from growing. I believe the reason there are so many cherry trees in castle ruins and along rivers is that they were chosen for spatial considerations: attractive appearance and visibility.

**The Japan Cherry Blossom Association also carries out cherry tree planting projects. What kinds of activities does this involve?**

Thanks to grants from the Japan Lottery Social Contribution Public Relations Program, the Japan Cherry Blossom Association has been gifting young *Somei Yoshino* trees free of charge all over Japan since 1967, and it also provides advice on planting. This has helped us popularize the cherry tree, which has been composed as the subject in many *waka* poems, loved by Japanese people since ancient times, and is a symbol of Japanese culture, throughout the country.

The *Somei Yoshino* tree commonly seen in Japan today is believed to be the result of crossbreeding or natural hybridization between the *Edohigan* cherry, an ancient wild Japanese cherry tree species, and

the *Oshima-zakura* cherry, and it was sold as "*Yoshino-zakura*" in the late Edo period (1850s–1860s). *Somei Yoshino* trees spread throughout Japan as a horticultural variety largely because they bloom before their leaves open, making them less damageable by frost, and also because they were planted as memorials or requiems at sites of abolished domains and demolished castles due to Japan's modernization that I mentioned earlier.

In fact, many places that are now considered top cherry blossom viewing spots were originally planted by individuals and have been handed down as regional assets. A great number of them were also planted in parks that were developed to coincide with national or high school athletic meets or other events. There are also many cases where cherry trees were planted to commemorate national events, such as the Olympic Games or the wedding of a member of the Japanese imperial family.

Recently, however, demand for cherry trees has been declining due to a decrease in the amount of public land, and there is concern that the number of growers is decreasing along with it. The Japan Cherry Blossom Association used to distribute 40,000 cherry trees nationwide each year, but the number has dropped to around 10,000 today. In addition, the number of varieties that can be stably supplied is limited, and it has become difficult to select varieties for donating.

**What do you see as the charm of cherry blossoms?**

Since cherry trees can grow new branches and bloom every year, they can live longer than humans as long as they get proper nutrition and water. A large-growing cherry tree will live beyond the human lifespan and has value as a reminder of our relationship with nature and the passage of time. As I said earlier, since ancient times, the Japanese people have valued the cherry tree as a partner in agriculture and a source of life, and have established it as a sacred tree. The beauty of the blossoms has been composed in many *waka* poems, and the fact that they bloom every spring without fail has made them a symbol of the earthly world and of life. I think it is important for Japanese people to once again recognize the value of cherry blossoms and convey to people abroad this image of cherry blossoms as the soul of the Japanese people.

**As a tree doctor, you must have seen cherry trees at many castles and other places in Japan in the course of your preservation activities, selecting top sites, and other work. Have there been any particularly memorable places or cherry trees?**

Unfortunately, I haven't really seen that many places, but I think Hirosaki Park in Hirosaki City is magnificent. In particular, the view of *hanaikada*[6] (flower rafts)

Photo: PIXTA

Kasumigajo Castle and cherry blossoms in Nihonmatsu City, Fukushima Prefecture

Kushima Castle and cherry blossoms in Omura Park, Omura City, Nagasaki Prefecture

of petals scattered all over the moat is imprinted on my memory. Also vivid in my mind is the sight of petals riding the wind along the riverside. The cherry blossoms at Kasumigajo Park in Nihonmatsu City, Fukushima Prefecture; Himeji Castle in Himeji City, Hyogo Prefecture; and Omura Park in Omura City, Nagasaki Prefecture are also fantastic. I believe many people think they are highly worth seeing.

**For tourists from overseas who visit Japan in spring when the cherry blossoms are in full bloom, what would you recommend as some of the most beautiful cherry blossom viewing spots and ways to enjoy them?**

In Japan's Top 100 Cherry Blossom Viewing Sites, as a rule we select at least one place for each of our 47 prefectures, so please use that for reference. I believe that visiting the ruins of castles and other places famous for their cherry blossoms gives one a chance to think about Japanese history, culture, and politics. Looking at things and judging for yourself can hone a person's sensitivity and deepen their understanding of Japanese culture. I believe that the word "*sakura*" is not just a word that refers to the cherry tree as a plant, but a concept that incorporates the sensibilities and culture of the Japanese people. I truly hope that, even overseas, the word *sakura* will be recognized as is, as "*sakura*," instead of "cherry tree," just as *nihonshu sake* is translated as "sake" overseas.

ASADA also recommends Chidorigafuchi in Chiyoda City, Tokyo as a cherry blossom viewing spot.

1. A frost that comes in early summer.
2. See *History of Japan's Unique Cherry Blossom Species and Flower-Loving Culture* in the April 2024 issue of *HIGHLIGHTING Japan*.
3. An edict on the usage of castles and castle ruins as military land. It categorized castles and castle ruins all over Japan into those to be used for military purposes (under the jurisdiction of the Army Ministry), and those to be dismantled and scrapped.
4. The region occupying the northeastern part of Honshu (the main island of Japan). It consists of six prefectures: Aomori, Iwate, Akita, Miyagi, Yamagata, and Fukushima.
5. The Tokai region is the Pacific coastal region of central Honshu (the main island of Japan). It generally refers to the three prefectures of Shizuoka, Aichi, and Mie, and the southern part of Gifu. The Kinki region is the central part of Honshu, and consists of the seven prefectures of Kyoto, Osaka, Hyogo, Nara, Wakayama, Shiga, and Mie.
6. Scattered cherry blossom petals flowing on the surface of a river or stream.