

The Yamataka Jindai Zakura



A Cherry Tree

as “Ancient as the Age of Mythology”

There are said to be four cherry trees in Japan estimated to be over one thousand years old. The most ancient of these is considered to be the tree growing in the grounds of a Buddhist temple in Yamanashi Prefecture, the blooms of which are said to have captivated people for more than two thousand years.

YANAGISAWA MIHO

THE oldest and largest of the cherry trees in Japan is considered to be the Yamataka Jindai

Zakura cherry tree (hereinafter Jindai Zakura) at Jisso-ji Temple in Yamataka, Hokuto City, Yamanashi Prefecture. Estimated to be some

two thousand years old, its name, Jindai, means “as ancient as the age of mythology.” Its height is around 10 meters and the circumference of its trunk is around 12 meters.

The Jindai Zakura is an example of the *Edo higan* wild species of cherry tree. Unlike the *Someiyoshino* variety of cherry found more widely in Japan, which is known for its light pink blossoms,

All Photos: Courtesy of Jisso-ji Temple



Jisso-ji Temple, Yamataka, Hokuto City, Yamanashi Prefecture

the Jindai Zakura has the distinctive feature of producing flowers in varying shades of pink on the same tree, ranging from deep pink to almost white. However, the two-thousand-year-old tree has a problem.

“Two-thirds of its trunk has withered, while the remaining third of the tree barely blooms,” says Matsunaga Jikiju, head priest of Jisso-ji Temple. “In 2003, a group of arborists and researchers came together to take measures to restore the vigor of the tree. These measures included protecting its roots and adding nutrient-rich soil, and as a result, the tree put forth new roots and branches. It looks a little bit healthier now.”

It is still in critical condition, but since the measures were taken many people have felt the strong

vitality of the tree in blossom.

Also blooming in the temple precincts is the Uchu Zakura (Space Cherry Tree). Seeds of the Jindai Zakura were carried by a Japanese astronaut to the International Space Station where

they spent some eight months. One seed that germinated after its return to Earth has grown to around five meters and puts forth blooms.

Says Matsunaga, “Curiously, Uchu Zakura blossoms face the ground, unlike the flowers of the parent tree. Furthermore, cherry blossoms ordinarily have five petals, but the Uchu Zakura sometimes bears flowers with six petals. I get a sense of the mysteries of the universe from such things.”

Every spring, the Jindai Zakura shows us the romance of life.

Matsunaga says, “When the Jindai Zakura comes into flower, you can see the lingering snow on the summit of Mount Kai-Komagatake in the distance and yellow daffodils blooming in the foreground. I’d like people to enjoy the picturesque view in its entirety while admiring the flowering Jindai Zakura.”



A mysterious six-petaled flower (center) of the Uchu Zakura (Space Cherry Tree)