

Kumano-zakura — A Newly Discovered Wild Species of Cherry Blossom, the First in 100 Years



Photo: PXTA

A Japanese white-eye perched on a fully bloomed Kumano-zakura tree

Emerging from the central region of Japan's Honshu Island and extending into the Pacific Ocean lies the Kii Peninsula, the country's largest. In the mountains of its southern region, a type of cherry blossom that was previously thought to be a variation of the Yama-zakura cherry blossom has been revealed through research to be a new wild species. The discovery of a new wild species is truly remarkable, marking the first such finding in Japan in a century. We spoke with individuals involved in conservation efforts to learn more about its characteristics and the circumstances surrounding its discovery. (Text: Tanaka Nozomi)



Photo: Japan Kumano Cherry Association

Kumano-zakura trees in bloom in the mountains and town of the Kumano region (Mihama Town, Mie Prefecture)



Photo: PIXTA
Kumano-zakura displays soft, elegant colors

In 2018, a newly discovered wild species of cherry blossom was named Kumano-zakura, or officially *Cerasus kumanoensis*, after its place of origin. Katsuki Toshio, from the Forestry and Forest Products Research Institute, who made the discovery, spoke to us about its background.

“Firstly, due to the impact of global warming, there has been a rise in winter temperatures in Japan, resulting in ‘Somei-yoshino’ cherry blossoms, the most common cultivar in Japan, no longer blooming in certain regions. Originally, Somei-yoshino couldn’t grow in Okinawa Prefecture, and now a similarly serious situation seems to be unfolding in the southern part of Kagoshima Prefecture. In Okinawa, there is a famous species of cherry blossom known as the Kanhi-zakura (see pages 20-21), which differs from the ‘Somei-yoshino’ with softly pink-tinged white petals gently fluttering and falling gracefully. Looking ahead, it is anticipated that areas where ‘Somei-yoshino’ cannot grow will expand, even including regions in Honshu. So, research on cherry blossoms that can thrive even in higher temperatures has begun, focusing on varieties growing in southern regions.”

“As part of a major research theme to prepare for cherry blossoms to replace the ‘Somei-yoshino,’ the discovery of the Kumano-zakura occurred during the investigation of cherry blossoms in southern regions,” says Katsuki. The Kumano-zakura is found in the warm southern regions of the Kii Peninsula, span-

ning parts of Mie, Nara, and Wakayama prefectures. Its blossoms bloom in delicate shades of pale pink, slightly preceding the ‘Somei-yoshino,’ making it a sight of beauty. The decline of ‘Somei-yoshino’ has been noticeable in the native habitats of the Kumano-zakura. As a result, efforts are underway to promote the Kumano-zakura for tourism purposes as a substitute. “Local stakeholders and tree doctors are leading research on the cultivation, conservation, and utilization of Kumano-zakura saplings,” Katsuki explains.

Tao Yuji, vice chairman of the Japan Kumano Cherry Association, which was established under the leadership of Katsuki, shares his thoughts. “Given that the natural habitat extends across three prefectures, encompassing a vast area, we are hoping for collaboration across regions to conserve the Kumano-zakura and promote its use in tourism. In regions with an early onset of spring, blossoms start appearing as soon as February, displaying their delicate beauty. We plan to conduct seminars aimed at deepening the knowledge of Kumano-zakura among local residents, encouraging their participation in conservation efforts. Our aim is to nurture and protect the natural habitat of the Kumano-zakura.”

As research and promotion of the Kumano-zakura advance, it has the potential to become the Kii Peninsula’s iconic cherry blossom alongside the Yamazakura in Yoshino. ■



Photo: Japan Kumano Cherry Association

The community is cooperating to cultivate and plant Kumano-zakura saplings.



Photo: PIXTA

A magnificent mature Kumano-zakura tree in full bloom, displaying its beautiful pale pink blossoms (Kiwa Town, Kumano City, Mie Prefecture)