

One of the most popular times for Australian tourists to visit Japan is during the cherry blossom season. This glorious spring flower is synonymous with Japan. Ask most people to name Japan's national flower and they would say the cherry. But in fact, Japan has no official flower in the same way that the golden wattle is Australia's. Perhaps this is because the cherry's status as Japan's 'national' flower doesn't need to be declared. For centuries, the Japanese affection for this briefly flowering tree has been very clear to see. Today **o-hanami** is one most anticipated spring pastimes.

Say 'flower viewing' and there is no need to specify what type of plant you're going out to look at. *O-hanami* is simply the character for flower 花 (hana) followed by the one for look or see 見 (mi), but there is no doubt in anyone's mind what the flower is—the cherry blossom or *sakura*.

O-hanami has a long history. It began in the Heian Period (794-1185), when members of the aristocracy held gatherings to appreciate the beauty of new spring flowers, especially of cherry blossoms. These people wrote poems inspired by the flowers. The custom of flower viewing itself featured in literature and art. During the Edo Period (1600-1867), common people also began to enjoy *o-hanami*. Many Edo Period *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints depict people taking part in *o-hanami*.

Today's *o-hanami* gatherings rarely feature poetry. The modern cherry-blossom viewing parties are best described as picnics under the trees by groups of friends and co-workers or families such as the photo [far right] which shows people enjoying *o-hanami* in Ueno Park, central Tokyo. Getting a good spot for the picnic, during the day or the evening, requires a bit of luck or determination. It is not uncommon for one person to be sent ahead with a groundsheet to reserve a spot.

Obviously the goal is to enjoy the blossoms at their best, and weather forecasts give predictions based on past years and report as the current season progresses (the 2015 season seems to be two to three days earlier than average). Real fans of cherry

blossoms, with the wherewithal to do so, could enjoy a long *o-hanami* tour of Japan by following the cherry blossoms from the south to the north of the archipelago.

On the southernmost of Japan's four main islands, Kyushu, the flowers generally open around the 22nd of March, and in Sapporo, the capital of Hokkaido in the north, it is as late as the end of April or start of May. (Any cherries in Okinawa will have flowered in January.)



A confectioner captures the beauty of the cherry—a bud about to blossom and a spray of open blooms.



Early and late flowering cherries are among the many types of cherry trees which have been developed especially for the beauty of their flowers.

There are said to be around 300 varieties under cultivation in Japan. There are also exuberant doubles (*yaezakura*) and the ever so elegant weeping cherries (*shidarezakura*). However, the single-layered bloom with five petals, each with a small v-shaped indent at its tip, is the quintessential cherry

flower. This is the flower that appears as a design motif on everything from daily crockery to expensive kimonos and is instantly recognised.

There are many places famous for their cherries and Japan National Tourist Organisation (JNTO) has a good nationwide list. Perhaps one of the nicest ways to enjoy cherry blossoms is to be going about your daily life in Japan, to turn a corner and see a

single cherry tree in full bloom, growing in its patch of the busy urban environment, but redolent of spring and new beginnings.

JNTO's cherry blossom page: www.jnto.go.jp/sakura/eng/index.php



People enjoying late-blooming cherries and swaths of rape flowers along a river bank in Shizuoka. Rape (canola) is normally associated with the countryside, but the combination of cherry and rape flowers can even be found in central Tokyo as shown here not far from the national parliament building, the Diet.

