

Cherry blossoms—spring comes to Japan

Cherry blossoms are truly beloved by Japanese people. More and more, Australians are choosing to experience the beauty of this seasonal attraction for themselves with spring one of the most popular times to visit Japan.

For centuries the Japanese have enjoyed the changes of the seasons, but it is the cherry blossoms, the sign that spring has truly arrived, which hold a special place in hearts throughout the country. The flower's short and impermanent beauty came to be seen as a metaphor for life and renewal. Today it is still a sign of new beginnings, coinciding with the start of the school year and the start of a new work year – the financial year also starts on 1 April.

Come spring and people look forward to *o-hanami* or cherry blossom viewing. For many that involves getting together with family, friends or colleagues and having a picnic in a nearby park to enjoy the cherry blossoms at their best. For others their preferred *o-hanami* might involve taking a walk along a riverbank—some are lit up at night. There are special weather forecasts to let people know when the cherry blossoms will be at their peak in any given location.

O-hanami is truly a long-observed custom, and say *o-hanami*, which literally means 'flower viewing', there is no doubt in anyone's mind which flower the 'hana' is referring to—the cherry blossom or *sakura*.

The custom of *o-hanami* 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. *O-hanami* 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*.

Given this long love of the cherry blossom, it's little surprise that many different types of cherries have been cultivated especially for the beauty of their flowers (rather than for the purpose of fruit). There are early and late flowering cherries, and with considered planting, major parks and gardens can maximise the cherry season. There are said to be around 300 varieties under cultivation in Japan. There are 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 so frequently in Japan—even used by the government, for example in the Japan National Tourism Organisation (JNTO) logo.

The cherry is closely associated with Japan, but it is not officially the national flower in the same way that the golden wattle is Australia's. (It is the Imperial chrysanthemum which appears on the front cover of Japanese nationals' passports.) However, the popular vote has seen the cherry blossom become the country's favourite flower and a default national floral emblem. When the national rugby union team plays, they proudly sport the cherry blossom as part of their logo and are known as the 'Brave Blossoms'.

Interested in planning your own trip to enjoy the cherry blossoms? JNTO Sydney has helpful information about the season:

www.jnto.org.au/experience/cherry-blossoms/



CHERRY BLOSSOM SEASON IN PICTURES

Riverbanks of cherry blossoms in Tokyo—while there are famous cherry blossom sites such as the hillsides of Yoshino which have inspired poets over centuries and attract enthusiasts each year, cherry blossoms can be found in the most urban of environments. Here it is the Meguro River in Tokyo whose riverbanks have become drifts of beautiful pale pink.

Examples of the **most common type** of cherry blossom—the single-layered bloom—and the exuberant 'double' cherry—the *yaezakura*.

One of the most popular, special seasonal foods is the **sakura-mochi** wrapped in a pickled leaf from an actual cherry tree—delicious! Note the cherry blossom tea in the cup.