

## **History of the Sakura Tree in New York**

In 1912, over 5,000 sakura (cherry) trees were gifted from Japan to the U.S. as a symbol of lasting friendship between the two countries. Over 3,000 trees from the City of Tokyo to the City of Washington, D.C. and 2,000 from the Committee of Japanese Residents of New York to New York City were sent. Since that time, Japanese organizations have made gifts of cherry trees to America to promote friendship between Japan and the United States.

The 2,000 sakura trees given to NY were a replacement for an earlier gift from Japan for the Hudson-Fulton Celebration in 1909, which commemorated the 100th anniversary of Robert Fulton's demonstration of his steam-powered boat on the Hudson River and the 300th anniversary of Henry Hudson's discovery of the Hudson River. Unfortunately, the tree saplings in 1909 were destroyed due to infestation with insects and nematodes.

The new shipment arrived in New York in 1912 and they were planted in Sakura Park, located on the Upper West side of Manhattan. For more information on the history of the sakura tree in NYC, visit the City of New York Parks and Recreation website at <http://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/Mo87/history>

## **Locations of Sakura Trees in New York**

The original gift of sakura trees to New York City was planted in Sakura Park (122nd Street and Riverside Drive) in 1912 and you can still see some remnant there. Brooklyn Botanic Garden (900 Washington Avenue) celebrates the cherry-blossom season in late April every year. This year's Sakura Matsuri: Cherry Blossom Festival will be held on Saturday April 28 and Sunday April 29, 2012. Relatively unknown to the public, the cherry blossom can also be spotted in spring in Central Park. Near the Bridle Path at 90th Street and along the East Drive at 66th Street are the Yoshino tree, a kind of sakura trees, that is a favorite in Japan.

## **About the Sakura (Cherry Blossom) Tree**

Sakura is the Japanese word for the cherry blossom tree, the most beloved spring flower in Japan. The history of sakura can be traced back to the Heian period (794-1185) in Japan. A large number of classic Japanese poems (such as Tanka and Haiku) have been produced addressing the transient beauty of Sakura blossom.

Hanami (flower-viewing) is still a popular social event in spring in Japan. Families and friends gather and picnic under fully-blossomed Sakura trees. After the long and bleak winter, Hanami heralds the arrival of spring, a warm and beautiful season filled with flowers across Japan.

The Japanese are mesmerized by Sakura not only for its beauty but also for the evanescent nature of its petals. The full blossom usually lasts only one week or so in spring -- this transience creates a feeling of what Japanese call *mono-no aware*, a deep realization of the transient nature of life -- an irony that we all know that beauty never lasts forever and a fate that real beauty like Sakura is short-lived in our world.

## **Mr. Torajiro Watase and Prof. Eiko Fukuda at LaGuardia**

Torajiro Watase was a turn of the century Tokyo councilman, educator, agronomist and business owner, who was commissioned by Mayor Yukio Ozaki to arrange for several thousand cherry tree saplings to be sent from Japan to the United States. The proposal, realized in 1912, was backed by the National Geographic Society, US Department of Agriculture, and Helen Taft -- the wife of then President Howard Taft -- who was committed to developing and beautifying the tidal basin of the Potomac River in Washington D.C. by planting these trees. A portion of these cherry saplings was also planted in Riverside Park in New York's Upper West Side of Manhattan, in an area behind the tomb of President U.S. Grant. Watase was a natural choice to take charge of this project from the Japanese side. A devout Christian, he had been educated by American scientists and missionaries at the Sapporo Agricultural College in the 1870s, when the Meiji government was committed to modernizing and "westernizing" Japanese society. Watase was fluent in English, a specialist of agriculture and forestry, and he had visited the United States several times, most notably in 1909 as a member of a Chamber of Commerce commission. Watase also fostered strong business connections in the United States with his import/export of seeds and agricultural supplies for his company Konoen. In Tokyo, he had played a central role in creating Hibiya Park, the city's first modern public park in the center of the capitol. He was an ardent civic champion, active in several progressive clubs and associations. His wife was an early proponent of temperance and women's rights in Japan. Among his eleven children, was his second son, Jiro Tanaka, who also studied botany at Sapporo Agricultural College and who was adopted as an heir to a Tokyo business family. By coincidence, one of Jiro's granddaughters, Eiko Fukuda, is an adjunct faculty member at LaGuardia Community College's Social Science Department. A graduate of Harvard and Columbia University, she teaches European and World History, and a course on East Asian societies.

## **Sakura and LaGuardia Community College**

Prof. Eiko Fukuda who teaches World History at LaGuardia Community College, is the great grand-daughter of Mr. Torajiro Watase, who made a significant contribution to the gift of the sakura trees in 1912. Mr. Watase was a member of The Honorary Commercial Commission of Japan to the USA in 1909, headed by Mr. Eiichi Shibusawa (known as "father of Japanese capitalism" in the 19th and early 20th century). Mr. Watase was the owner of Tokyo Konoen, an agricultural machines and supply company. His agricultural specialities and his meticulous research about geology in the U.S. was an indispensable key to the successful afforestation of sakura trees in the U.S.

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