USDA Foreign Agricultural Service
GAIN Report
Global Agricultural Information Network

Date: 3/30/2010
GAIN Report Number: JA0507

Japan

Post: Tokyo ATO

Flowering Cherry Trees – A Gift from Japan

Report Categories:
Market Development Reports

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Report Highlights:
As part of the Partners in Agriculture celebration, FAS/Japan is writing a series of reports on the special agricultural relationship between the United States and Japan. This report details the gift by the Japanese government in 1912 of flowering cherry trees to the city of Washington D.C. and the lasting friendship it created.

Introduction

In late March and early April the flowering cherry trees in Washington DC and central Japan are in bloom. Perhaps nothing symbolizes the agricultural partnership between the United States and Japan more than the Japanese flowering cherry trees along the Tidal Basin in Washington, DC. This national treasure was given to the United States by Japan in 1912 "as a living symbol of friendship between the Japanese and American peoples."

Cherry trees frame the Washington Monument

The story of the generous gift from Japan, however, is much more complex than is commonly known. The flowering cherry trees that were planted along the Tidal Basin were actually the second such gift from Japan, and the importation of these cherry trees had a profound impact on USDA and the U.S. government's plant quarantine regulations. Amazingly, years later the United States gave flowering cherry trees to Japan cultivated from the genetic stock of the original 1912 cherry trees.

The Japanese Flowering Cherry Tree

Dr. David Fairchild, who was the director of USDA's Section of Seed and Plant Introduction from 1898 until 1928, was a character bigger than life. Fairchild traveled to scores of countries from Finland to Zanzibar. He studied cotton growing in Egypt, water chestnuts in China, hops in Bohemia, and nuts in England. He brought avocados from Hawaii, mangoes from Bombay, onions from Egypt, bamboo from Japan, soybeans from China, and chaulmoogra (a leprosy remedy) from Burma. During his lifetime, Fairchild was credited with overseeing the introduction of more than 80,000 species and varieties of plants into the United States. A member of the board of trustees of the National Geographic Society, Fairchild also wrote several books, including *Exploring for Plants* (1930) and the autobiographical *The World Was My Garden* (1938). [1] Fairchild died in Florida in 1954.

Perhaps Fairchild's most famous introduction into the United States was the flowering cherry tree from Japan. Fairchild conducted field trips throughout Asia in the early 1900s and became intrigued by the Japanese flowering cherry trees. First admired and grown by Japanese

Dr. David Fairchild

nobility, choice cherry specimens were planted in the palaces and mansions of the then capital city of Kyoto as early as 794.[2] On April 26, 1902, Fairchild arrived in Kobe Japan to collect flowering cherry trees[3]. Unfortunately, he arrived too late in spring to see the blooms from the trees that he had set out to collect. Nonetheless, he traveled the length of Japan looking for economically viable plants. During his journey, he collected 18 types of bamboo and a type of lawn grass called Zoysia japonica. His most important finding, however, was the flowering cherry tree. Fairchild collected 30 different types of Japanese cherry trees.

There was some concern in the American horticultural community that Japanese flowering cherry trees would not hardy enough for the Eastern United States. Fairchild wanted to prove these naysayers wrong. He actually purchased "In the Woods," his estate in Maryland, in 1905 as a place where he could grow Japanese cherry trees and even hired a Japanese gardener by the name of Mori. He soon purchased cherry trees from his friend H. Suzuki of the Yokohama Nursery Company. With the help of Mori, he planted these trees on his estate to test their hardiness.

The trees not only survived the winter but they produced beautiful flowers in the spring. Extremely pleased with his success, Fairchild worked with Eliza Ruhamah Skidmore, an American travel writer and photographer, as the major proponents of importing Japanese flowering cherry trees for the beautification of Washington, D.C. He wanted to transform Washington's Potomac Park into a "field of cherries."

Fairchild's estate

There was some initial confusion in the United States on what a Japanese flowering cherry tree was. One day when Fairchild was showing his flowering cherry trees at his Maryland estate to the Japanese Ambassador and his staff, another guest, Franklin K. Lane, who had been in the Cabinet of President Wilson, and who arrived when Fairchild was showing the trees, asked: "Cherry trees? Cherry trees? Do they produce good cherries?" [4] In defense of his beloved tree, Fairchild shot back, "Must a rose or dogwood

produce a fruit for us to eat [to appreciate them]?" Fairchild's wife Marian tactfully suggested that an appropriate name for the tree in the United States would be "cherry blossom trees" to prevent uncertainty.

To help popularize the trees in Washington DC, Fairchild invited boys from schools in the District of Columbia to come out to his "In the Woods" estate in Maryland for Arbor Day and to collect trees to plant in their school yards. As Fairchild related in his book *The World Was My Garden*: "It was a wonderful day in the spring of 1908 when the boys came single file through the woods. The buds on the oaks were red with young growth, and hepaticas and blood-roots and dog-tooth violets were coming up under the dead leaves on the ground. Each boy was shown how to dig and plant his tree; we gave them a little talk on tree culture, and then they went back on the special car which the Street Car Company had provided for their transportation."[5]

The following day, Fairchild spoke at the Franklin School, where because of a lack of a schoolyard the tree was planted across the street in Franklin Park.[6] During his talk, he publicly promoted the idea of a "field of cherries" in Potomac Park. The *Washington Star* newspaper was covering the event and wrote that "Fairchild had aroused the enthusiasm of his audience by telling them that Washington would one day be famous for its flowering cherry trees." Eliza Ruhamah Skidmore, who also attended the lecture, sent a note to Helen Taft, wife of President Taft, outlining the idea of importing Japanese cherry trees for Potomac Park.

The First Lady was devoted to the beautification of the Nation's Capital, particularly Potomac Park, and was intrigued by this idea. Between 1870 and 1907 the U.S. Army Core of Engineers worked to make the Potomac more navigable by building a retaining wall along its banks and then dredging the river silt and depositing it on what would become the grounds of East and West Potomac Park.[7] The First Lady quickly responded to Ms. Skidmore's note and was thrilled with the idea.

President Taft had been very popular in Japan. As Secretary of War, Taft helped to negotiate the Portsmouth Peace Treaty that ended the Russo-Japanese War in 1905. When he visited Japan in 1905 to prepare for the final negotiations, Taft received a hero's welcome including a fireworks display in Yokohama harbor, a welcome by the Mayor of Tokyo Yukio Ozaki and dinner with the Emperor and Empress of Japan. [8]

The idea of the First Lady wanting to import Japanese flowering cherry trees to beautify Washington, DC inspired the Japanese government to donate 2,000 cherry trees in 1910. The effort was led by Dr. Jokichi Takamine, the Japanese chemist famous as the discoverer of adrenaline and takadiastase, and Yukio Ozaki, the Mayor of Tokyo. As Ozaki wrote in his autobiography: "I always wanted to show, in some way, appreciation to the government of the United States for their kindness shown to Japan during the Russo-Japanese war. When I heard that Mrs. Taft was interested in planting Japanese flowering cherry trees in Washington, I took the liberty to send the trees as a gift from the city of Tokyo."[9]

While Fairchild was willing to take chances with imported plants in the name of U.S. agriculture, Charles Marlatt, acting chief of the Bureau of Entomology of USDA, was more concerned about preventing the introduction of foreign pests. Marlatt had a solid scientific background, widely known, for example, for his 1907 landmark work on periodical cicadas where he grouped cicadas into different categories based on the year they emerge. According to Marlatt, "it is the unknown thing that you cannot find that we have to protect this country from."[10] He was particularly critical of the U.S. chestnut blight caused by a fungus traced from China that destroyed a symbol of the bountiful American countryside, and the gypsy moth, the most notorious foreign insect introduced into the United States, as prime examples of the need for quarantine restrictions.

Ironically, Fairchild and Marlatt were close friends. They had grown up together in Manhattan, Kansas and had come to Washington DC in the same year. Marlatt, in fact, was the best man in Fairchild's wedding. Both Fairchild and Marlatt had extensive experience in Japan. However, while Fairchild used his time in Japan to look for new plants to introduce into the United States, Marlatt used his honeymoon in 1901-02 to inspect Japan and eastern China for scale insect species that might endanger American fruit trees.[11] Protecting the United States was also personal for Marlatt, as he witnessed the slow death of his wife after the honeymoon because of an infectious illness she contracted on the trip.

In 1909, Marlatt took charge of the campaign within the entomology section of USDA to control plant imports. He used different tactics to build consensus for federal plant quarantine laws. First, he tried to quietly shepherd plant quarantine legislation through Congress, and effort that ultimately failed. The House actually passed the legislation, but when the nurserymen found out about the legislation they had the

bill sidetracked in the Senate. He decided the next approach was to raise the consciousness of influential elements of the public and in doing so spur Congress to action on quarantine legislation.

Marlatt used the importation of the Japanese flowering cherry trees as the final piece needed in his campaign for federal plant quarantine legislation. Fairchild became a liaison for the gift, accepting shipment from Japan to Seattle in the name of USDA, and arranged transport across the country in refrigerated box cars and provided planting advice to federal landscapers. [12] While it did not have the authority to inspect private plant introductions, the Bureau of Entomology had the

Arrival of the trees

authority to inspect USDA plant introductions. Thus, to Fairchild's surprise and chagrin, Marlatt's office inspected the trees.

One of the USDA inspectors was Flora Patterson, one of the first woman scientists at USDA and the first woman mycologist in the Department.[13] Patterson and her colleagues including Nathan Cobb, a nematologist, and J.G. Sanders, an entomologist, took a politically unpopular position and advised that the cherry trees be destroyed. In a letter written by Patterson to Marlett about the infected trees, she noted that in addition to crown gall "present on 45% of the trees ... the girdling of five trees apparently has resulted from the attack of a *Pestalozzia* sp…It is impossible to decide with the limited time available for research if the *Pestalozzia* is of an indigenous species."

Marlatt issued a formal USDA report that stated that the shipment was infested with "practically every pest imaginable." He recommended

that the entire shipment be destroyed. Marlatt's recommendation went all the way to President Taft who accepted his advice. On January 28, the dormant trees were taken to the Washington Monument grounds and burned.

Fairchild was disappointed that the trees were burned but tried to be philosophical: "My only comfort was the knowledge that the trees had been so large, and their roots had been so cut, that I felt sure the greater number of them would have perished in the raw soil of the Speedway [West Potomac Park]."

This incident led to passage by the U.S. Congress of the Plant Quarantine Act of 1912, which was the first legal action taken in the United States to prevent the introduction of pests from foreign countries. The Federal Horticultural Board was set up to enforce the act. Marlatt would be its director for almost 20 years. This law, and others that followed it, established a network of inspection stations at major ports of entry and gave the federal government authority to organize border quarantines, to inspect all agricultural products, and to restrict entry of any infested goods. Today, these inspections stations operate under the jurisdiction of USDA's Animal Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS).

Not wanting to create a diplomatic incident, Secretary of State Philander Chase Cox sent a letter to the Japanese Ambassador to the United States expressing deep regret for the incident. Colonel Spencer Cosby, the Superintendent of Public Buildings and Grounds responsible for the Potomac Park, also wrote a letter of apology to the Tokyo mayor Yukio Ozaki.

Although the incident was embarrassing to both countries, as anyone who has visited the Nation's Capital in the spring, it is obvious that there are flowering cherry trees in Potomac Park. The Japanese government, undaunted, recognized the long-term benefit of a gift to the United States and again donated 3,020 trees in 1912 in the name of the city of Tokyo. Representatives of the Imperial Quarantine Service, the Imperial Horticultural Station and the Imperial University supervised the selection and assured USDA that the trees were free from pests.[14] This time USDA accepted the trees, stating "that no shipment could have been cleaner and freer from insect pests." On March 27, First Lady Taft and the Viscountess Chinda, wife of the Japanese Ambassador, planted the first two cherry trees on the northern bank of the Tidal Basin "as a living symbol of friendship between the Japanese and American peoples."[15]

Japanese Ambassador and Viscountess Chinda

In 1914, USDA, under the leadership of Fairchild, began propagating and distributing the Japanese flowering cherry trees to U.S. nurseries that started the universal planting of cherry trees throughout the United States.[16] Fairchild was also responsible for USDA's reciprocal gift to the city of Tokyo of several hundred dogwood trees, a large quantity of dogwood seeds and mountain laurel plants.[17] In 1918, Fairchild received a letter from the Mayor of Tokyo thanking him for the gifts: "The dogwoods which your government sent in 1915 and 1917 blossomed in the spring quite beautifully with popular admiration … it seems that they are very well suited to our climate and I hope they will do better in the future. I thank you very much for the Kalmias which were sent by your government. We shall take the best care of them and I hope they will do just as well as the dogwoods."

Over the years, the flowering cherry trees in Washington, DC continued to bring the United States and Japan closer together. In a ceremony in 1954, the Japanese Ambassador to the United States presented a 20-ton ceremonial Japanese stone lantern to Washington DC.[18]

Stone lantern presented in 1954

The lantern was thought to have once stood near the Kan'eiji Temple in Ueno Park, Tokyo. The ceremony marked the 100th anniversary of the first treaty between the United States and Japan

signed by Commodore Matthew Perry on March 31, 1854. In 1965 the Japanese government made another gift of 3,800 American grown cherry trees to the City of Washington, many of which were planted on the Washington Monument Grounds.[19] The ceremony was particularly symbolic of the 1912 dedication with Lady Bird Johnson, the First Lady of the United States and the wife of the Japanese Ambassador planting two trees in the Tidal Basin area.

Preserving the Japanese Flowering Cherry Trees

Since the 1950s there has been a drive to preserve the original Japanese flowering cherry trees that were given by Japan to the United States in 1912 and came from the Adachi Ward of Tokyo. These trees are Yoshino variety trees and are often called the witness trees. Unfortunately, Yoshino trees had become rare in the Adachi Ward because of World War II damage and subsequent city development.

In 1951, the Japanese asked if cuttings could be taken from the Washington flowering cherry trees to be sent to Tokyo to restore the trees on the Arakawa River in the Adachi Ward.[20] The National Capital Parks officials sent 55 cuttings from 11 of the original Yoshido trees. In 1980, Japan requested additional trees because of the change of the course of the Arakawa River and 2,000 cuttings were taken from the original Yoshino cherries and sent to Japan.

Roland Maurice Jefferson was a botanist and plant explorer who worked for the United States National Arboretum. During his time with USDA from 1956 to 1987, he worked extensively with the Japanese on the Japanese cherry tree. In 1981, he located seven original varieties located in the United States outside of Washington, DC and sent them to Japan.[21] He also propagated a flowering cherry tree from a cutting from an original Yoshino tree that was presented by Nancy Reagan to Yoshio Ogawara, the Japanese Ambassador to the United States. It was named the President Reagan cherry tree by Governor Shunichi Suzuki of Tokyo. It is located in Toneri Park in Tokyo where the Reagan cherry tree and 1,200 other cherry trees propagated by the U.S. government are located.

Jefferson expanded this plant exchange in 1982.[22] National Arboretum officials recognized that America had been losing many ornamental cherry cultivars and the severe restrictions caused by plant quarantine laws had resulted in a decline of genetic diversity in cherry cultivars. The Friends of the National Arboretum sent Jefferson to collect flowering cherry tree seeds. He began collecting seeds on the

Kyushu, Japan's southern island. But he soon found that he was not able to a collect sufficient amount of seeds. He came up with an idea to have Japanese school children help with collecting seeds. Thus, was born the Friendship in Flowers project.

The project was sponsored by the Flower Association of Japan and the U.S. National Arboretum and enlisted schoolchildren from both countries collecting seeds of their native trees, which would then be exchanged with one another. The Japanese schoolchildren collected cherry tree seeds while the American children collected seeds of the dogwood tree, which was beloved by Presidents Jefferson and Washington. Japanese and American school children collected over two million seeds. This project was to symbolize 1912, when the Japanese gave America cherry trees and the United States sent Japan dogwood trees as a reciprocal gift.

The Story Continues

The story of the Japanese flowering cherry trees is a symbol of our partnership in agriculture and the close friendship between the United States and Japan. Thanks to the efforts of USDA employees such as David Fairchild and Roland Jefferson, the popularity of Japanese flowering cherry trees in the United States and our friendship with Japan continues to flourish. An example of our close relationship is the world famous National Cherry Blossom Festival that takes place every year in Washington, DC in late March and early April. The Japanese Ambassador to the United States is the honored guest of the festival.

Cherry blossom trees and the Jefferson Memorial

Japanese flowering cherry trees near the Washington Monument

[1] "David Grandison Fairchild," Everglades Biographies: Everglades Information Network & Digital Library Florida International University Libraries
[2] "Enduring Roots: Encounter with Trees, History and the American Landscape," Gayle Brandow Samuels, Rutgers University Press, p. 76.
[3] "Ornamental Plant Introduction- Building on the Past," by John L. Creech, Arnoldia, p. 16.
[4] "The World Was My Garden," by David Fairchild, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943, p. 411.
[5] Ibid, p. 411-412.
[6] "Enduring Roots: Encounter with Trees, History and the American Landscape," Gayle Brandow Samuels, Rutgers University Press, p. 79.
[7] Ibid, p. 78.
[8] "Enduring Roots: Encounter with Trees, History and the American Landscape," Gayle Brandow Samuels, Rutgers University Press, p. 78.
[9] Ibid, p. 78.
[10] Ibid, p. 68.
[11] Ibid, p. 66.
[12] "The Beauty and Menace of Japanese Cherry Trees: Conflicting Visions of American Ecological Independence," Isis, Vol. 87, No. 1, (March, 1996), by Philip J. Pauly, The University of Chicago Press, p. 68.
[13] "Flora W. Patterson: The First Woman Mycologist at the USDA," Amy Y. Rossman Systematic Botany and Mycology Laboratory, APSnet
[14] "The Beauty and Menace of Japanese Cherry Trees: Conflicting Visions of American Ecological Independence," Isis, Vol. 87, No. 1, (March, 1996), by Philip J. Pauly, The University of Chicago Press, pp. 67-68.
[15] Ibid, p.68.
[16] "The World Was My Garden," by David Fairchild, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943, p. 424.
[17] Ibid, p. 414.
[18] "The Japanese Flowering Cherry Trees of Washington, D.C.: A Living Symbol of Friendship. National Arboretum Contribution No. 4," (1977) by Jefferson, Roland M. and Alan F. Fusonie. Washington: USDA, Agricultural Research Service, p. 24.
[19] Ibid, p. 24.
[20] "Enduring Roots: Encounter with Trees, History and the American Landscape," Gayle Brandow Samuels, Rutgers University Press, p. 82.
[21] Ibid, p. 83.
[22] Ibid, pp. 84-85.