

# Feature HOME & GARDEN

## A gift from the Orient

**Grant Jenkins** of The Tree Company looks at the beautiful ornamental flowering cherries available

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Cherry blossom is Japan's national flower, revered and venerated surrounded by tradition and ceremony. Sakura is the Japanese word for the flowering cherry tree, their short but spectacular floral displays have become one of the long awaited signs of spring as much in the west as in the east. In Japan they are planted around temples and places of worship — the Japanese people consider the flowering cherry tree a powerful symbol reminding us of the beauty and transient nature of life, its flowers lasting only a few weeks. The annual ceremony of cherry blossom watching is where people congregate and picnic under the best trees in honour and celebration of the blossom and appreciation of the changing season. In Japan there are many large plantings of cherry trees throughout towns and cities and when



they flower en masse become an amazing spectacle drawing visitors from all over the world.

Ornamental cherries are not confined to Japan alone, China and Korea have their own wild and cultivated trees and all ornamental cherries that are planted in Ireland originate from the Far East. Many of the wild cherries have been cultivated over the centuries not for their fruit but purely for ornament.

Their introduction into Europe came during the 19th century when the trade routes to the east were opened. In the late 19th Century a Professor Charles Sargent Director of the Arnold Arboretum in Boston, America discovered a tree on the mountain slopes of Mount Fujiyama,

Japan. This tree was eventually classified in Latin as *Prunus sargentii* or Sargents cherry and is a stout strong tree, growing when mature in excess of twelve metres high. It will tolerate moderate coastal conditions, its flowers are pink opening in April and the leaves will show a wonderful autumn display of colour. The Japanese name for this tree is 'Great Mountain Cherry' and it is native to Japan and Korea.

Many of the trees we see today were introduced during the first half of the 20th century by an avid cherry collector called Captain Collingwood Ingram. He was responsible for collecting and hybridising many trees and making them available to the public. He also strangely discovered in

1923 an unusual cherry tree growing in a garden in Sussex, England, on a visit to Japan he identified the tree from an old painting. The tree had been extinct in Japan since the 18th Century, the Japanese name for the tree was 'Tai-Haku' and it was later reintroduced to its native country, it can only be assumed that it was growing in Sussex as a very early introduction. Every 'Tai-Haku' tree around the world is derived from this one tree. The flowers are snow white and are the biggest flowers of all the flowering cherries.

Another tree that was introduced in the early 1900s was *Prunus 'Shirofugen'* this is a lovely tree and one of the best, its

flowers are long lasting with large double blooms that are white with a pink finish. The young leaves emerge copper in colour changing to green as they mature. The tree has a spreading crown with a stem that does not get to tall so it is an ideal tree for a small garden.

There is an amazing selection of ornamental flowering cherries that you can discover and new ones are regularly being developed, however some ornamental cherries are planted not just for flowering. A favourite of mine is the Tibetan cherry or *Prunus serrula* this tree comes from West and South West China and has the most stunning bark especially in the autumn when layers of the outer bark peel away in strips to expose the new polished looking mahogany bark beneath. The flowers are small and lack the impact of other ornamental cherries but this is a magnificent tree as a specimen or when planted in a mixed scheme for example with Pines and Himalayan Birch.

Highly regarded in the east, ornamental cherries are so entrenched in history and tradition that even brave Samurai warriors considered there be no greater honour than to die on the battlefield like wind scattered cherry blossom. They bring pleasure to our modern lives and encourage us to reflect on the simple wonders of nature, so go out find a

flowering cherry and enjoy cherry blossom watching this spring — Sayonara!

If you need any further information regarding this article or indeed any other tree matters please get in touch with us at The Tree Company, Ballydehob, Co Cork or email us at [info@thetreecompany.ie](mailto:info@thetreecompany.ie) or call our office on 028 37630.

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