

The cherry blossom front is moving northward

The exciting season of HANAMI has come!

Cherry blossoms migrate from south to north

Have you heard of sakura zensen, the 'cherry blossom front'? It refers to a line on the map showing where cherry trees are forecast to start blossoming. Since Japan extends from north to south, on any particular day of the year the temperature in one part of Japan will be completely different from that in another part. And similarly, because it really depends on the climate when and where the cherry trees will bloom, the cherry trees will begin to blossom at completely different times too. People are eager to know when this will be, as cherry blossoms are the messengers of spring.

The front generally advances from south to north, from places of low altitude to places of high altitude, but it sometimes happens that cherry trees bloom earlier in the southern Kanto region than in Kyushu in the south of Japan, so in some years the front is not always shown as a continuous line. The Japan Meteorological Agency bases its forecasts of the sakura zensen mainly on observations of sample trees of the variety called Somei Yoshino.

Originally started for academic research

The forecast was originally part of academic research into agricultural meteorology by the Central Meteorological Observatory to observe cherry blossoms, and the first blooming forecast was made for cherry trees near Tokyo in 1928. After spending many years and making several improvements, the Japan Meteorological Agency now announces the opening date when at least five to six flowers have opened on the sample trees. They say the time from when the blossoms first open until full-bloom (more than 80% of flowers have opened) is usually around sixteen days in the Okinawa and Amami regions, seven days from Kyushu to the Tokai and Kanto regions, five days in the Hokuriku and Tohoku regions, and just four days in Hokkaido. Thus, the blooming season tends to finish earlier as you move northward. It is said that some refined nobles in ancient times used to travel north in step with the timing of blooming just in order to admire the beauty of the flowers in each place.

'When will they start to blossom?' is the big question

Of course, modern Japanese people also love cherry blossoms. When the cherry buds in their town start to swell, men and women start getting excited and start looking forward to having HANAMI, a garden party under the cherry blossoms. However, even if you fix the date for your HANAMI party, it is not certain that the cherry trees will be blossoming. "Why don't we have a party this weekend?" "Will the blossoms be out on that day?" "Oh, it might be too late. We don't want to miss them!" This kind of conversation often arises in offices, homes, and among friends, and even grown Japanese start to fidget like children in March and April.

The poet Ariwara no Narihira (825-880) sang of the beauty of the cherry blossoms in his tanka poem.

Yononaka ni taete sakura no nakariseba, haru no kokoro wa nodoke karamashi
(If there were no cherry blossoms in this world, how peaceful my mind would be during the spring time!)

How interesting that the poet wishes the cherry blossoms could be gone because he loves them so much. It sounds like part of a love song, doesn't it?

Well, what people eat under the cherry blossoms? Let's see it about various places across Japan.



Kyoto
Blooming period: From the end of March to early April

You can find lots of places in Kyoto to enjoy an excellent view of cherry blossoms, for example, along the banks of the Kamogawa river, along Tetsugaku no Michi, or at Maruyama park. How about bringing along some cute temari-zushi; it would make a perfect box lunch for your HANAMI party. Temari are balls that girls played with in ancient times; they are balls wound tightly around with silk threads of many colors. This photo shows Tsumami-zushi created by Kashiwai, a sushi restaurant in Kyoto. It is beautiful like Japanese confectionery. Opening the box reveals the colorful and adorable temari-zushi laid out in a grid pattern. How elegant each piece of sushi looks! Make sure you enjoy its beautiful appearance before you have a bite. But of course, the taste is authentic, too! Each piece of sushi is carefully prepared by using Japanese traditional skills, such as marinating red snapper with kelp or dipping tuna fish in the special soy sauce.



Yamanashi
Blooming period: From early to mid-April

In Arakurayama Sengen Park, there is a marvelous spot from which you can see Mt. Fuji, Goju no To (a five-storied pagoda), and the cherry blossoms all at the same time. You need to either walk up a 397-step stairway or follow a paved mountain path to reach the spot which is at the top of the mountain, but just imagine how excellent the view would be after all your efforts! This place is more popular with tourists from all over the world, especially those from Thailand, than it is with Japanese. You will be able to find lots of ema (wooden plaques) written in Thai. A local specialty of Yamanashi is hotō, a dish made of wide, roughly cut flat udon noodles simmered with pumpkin and other vegetables in a miso soup. The pumpkin thickens the soup and saltiness of the miso combined with the sweetness of the pumpkin creates a unique flavor.



Tokyo
Blooming period: From the end of March to early April

Famous places in Tokyo for viewing cherry blossoms are Ueno Park and Sumida Park. There are also many kinds of food to enjoy at HANAMI parties under the trees, such as norimaki (rolled sushi), gomoku zushi (sushi with several ingredients mixed in or sprinkled on top), sakura mochi (a rice cake with sweet bean paste wrapped with a cherry leaf), and kushi dango (small rice dumplings on a stick). We would like to introduce habutae dango, which was one of the specialties of Tokyo in the Edo era. Habutae is a traditional Japanese silk fabric, and people began to call these dumplings habutae dango because their texture was as smooth as silk. Masaoka Shiki, one of the literary giants of the Meiji era sang of this particular dango in one of his poems, and also his friend Natsume Soseki used to be a regular customer at this shop.



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Aomori
Blooming period: From the end of April to early May

The story of the cherry trees in Hirosaki Park started when the Tsugaru clan requisitioned 25 cherry trees from Kyoto in 1715. Now there are 2600 trees with over 50 different types of cherry blossoms growing in the park. In most regions there are only three or four flowers per bud, but in this region, as many as five or six blossoms spring from one bud, so you can enjoy the elegance of branches bowing under the weight of an abundance of flowers right before your eyes. The secret to getting a large volume of flowers on the trees lies in the way of pruning and thinning out weak branches. Since Aomori prefecture is famous for producing apples, they applied the same techniques to cherry trees. Hirosaki is also famous for stalls selling Aomori-shoga-miso oden. It is said to have its origins in 1945, when one of the food stalls near Aomori station started adding grated ginger to its miso-tare for oden in order to warm up ferryboat passengers, and the dish was well-received and became popular.



'Let's learn some easy Japanese.'
Here we have some easy Japanese words and expressions you can use at HANAMI (party for viewing cherry blossoms).

- 桜がきれい → **Sakura ga kirei**: The flowers are beautiful.
- 乾杯(かんぱい) → **Kampai**: Cheers!
- いただきます [飲食する前に言う言葉] → **Itadakimas**. (An expression you say right before you eat and drink)
- 飲む → **nomu**: drink / 飲みます → **nomimasu**: I drink it.
- 食べる → **taberu**: eat / 食べます → **tabemasu**: I eat it.
- のみの → **nomimono**: beverages
- ビール → **biru**: beer
- さけ(日本酒) → **sake**: liquor, (**nihonshu**: Japanese wine)
- おちゃ(お茶) → **ocha**: tea
- みず(水) → **mizu**: water
- たべもの → **tabemono**: food
- べんとう → **bento**: box lunch
- だんご → **dango**: Japanese dumpling made from rice flour
- はし → **hashi**: chopsticks
- 美味しい(おいしい) → **oshii**: delicious
- 楽しい(たのしい) → **tanoshii**: fun
- ごちそうさま(でした) → **Gochiso sama (deshita)**: (An expression you say when you finish eating. Adding 'deshita' at the end makes it sound more polite.) [食べ終わったときにつかう言葉]



Kazumi Suzuki: volunteer teacher of Japanese language, member of 'New wind from Asia' (NPO)



Iwate
Blooming period: From mid-April to early May

Kitakami Tenshochi Park, along the banks of the Kitakami River, has about 10,000 cherry trees, mostly Somei yoshino, but also including others such as Yae zakura, and Beni yamazakura. If you go to the Kitakami Tenshochi Cherry Blossom Festival, which is held in mid-April, you can enjoy an excellent view of colorful koinobori (carp streamers) fluttering in the sky above the Kawakami River along with the cherry blossoms. Iwate has a local specialty, Kitakami-korokke. Kitakami-korokke is made from sticky and tasty taro called "futago-satoimo". A blend of ground Kurage-wagyu meat, "Shirayuri pork".



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The Norinchukin Bank The Norinchukin Bank

The mission of The Norinchukin Bank is

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