

Cherry blossoms - who, what, where

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Photo by Mike, Flickr

Every year, the flowering cherry blossoms signify the arrival of spring, their beauty captivating many. Now in its 10th year, the Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival has helped spread interest in cherry blossoms and facilitated community education on the trees.

Before the festival officially begins, David Tracey, a community ecologist, leads a group through Oppenheimer Park. The park is the site of the 'Legacy Sakura' trees planted to commemorate the first wave of Japanese immigrants who settled in the area. He says that hundreds of cherry trees were gifted to Vancouver from Japan in the 1930s and planted in Stanley Park at the Japanese cenotaph.

In the 1950s, more cherry trees were donated by the Japanese consul as a symbol of the relationship between Canada and Japan. These trees were planted along the Cambie Corridor and around the monument in Stanley Park.

“Cherry blossoms have a really deep meaning tied to Buddhism,” says Tracey. “Their fleeting beauty sends the sad but beautiful message that life could end at any time and we should appreciate every moment.”

Cherry scouts

Douglas Justice, associate director and curator of collections at the UBC Botanical Gardens, serves as the resident expert on cherry tree identification for the festival. Justice says that the festival enables community members to become 'cherry scouts' who help identify and locate different types of cherry trees.

“It became obvious that the real power was to use the community to search out [cherry] trees, take pictures and send those out to everyone so that we could collectively figure out what they were,” says Justice. “Nobody had an inventory of the trees [in the city] which I found interesting.”

Justice has been hosting yearly Blossom Biology workshops during the festival to teach potential cherry scouts the basics of cherry blossom plant and flower structures so that they will be able to go out and scout for cherry blossoms. The workshop takes place at VanDusen Botanical Gardens each year.

“At the end of the evening, most people have a much better idea of how to recognize major groupings of cherries,” says Justice.



Douglas Justice at a tree planting ceremony at VanDusen Gardens. | Photo by Mel Yap

The UBC Botanical Gardens has an online forum that is used largely for cherry scouts to post pictures and generate discussion on the whereabouts of flowering trees. As a result, the festival has been able to create neighbourhood maps with more than 2,100 locations of ornamental cherries. Fifty-four cultivars have now been identified, and the city has approximately 40,000 cherry trees in its inventory. According to Justice, the oldest tree is around 75–80 years old, located at the cenotaph in Stanley Park.

10th anniversary celebration

To celebrate the festival's 10th anniversary, founding executive director Linda Poole says that they will be selling different cultivars for planting on private property as part of the Birthday Blossoms Tree Planting Program. Another new feature this year will be a "Blossom Barge" moored at Granville Island with 36 different cultivars, which sets the stage for a two-hour performance by local talent.

"The challenge each year is to predict when to set the dates of the festival since we set the dates six months in advance," says Poole.

Although the festival was slow to take off due to a lack of funding, Poole hopes that it will expand into a cultural mainstay similar to the 104-year-old cherry blossom festival in Washington, DC.

The Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival will take place from March 24–April 17. For more information, please visit www.vcbf.ca.



Linda Poole, founding executive director of the Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival. | Photo courtesy of Linda Poole

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