



An enduring gift

—by Ilse Genovese

Image source: <http://pink.heels.blogspot.com>

Each year, the Tidal Basin in Washington, D.C., explodes in soft pink, and crowds of Americans and visitors from around the world come to the Nation's capital on a pilgrimage of friendship. The two-week festival organized annually in the City commemorates the 1912 gift of 3,000 cherry trees from Mayor Yukio Ozaki of Tokyo to the City of Washington as a symbol of the growing friendship between the people of the United States and Japan.

The first two of these trees were planted in a simple ceremony on March 27, 1912, by First Lady Helen Herron Taft and Viscountess Chinda, wife of the Japanese ambassador on the north bank of the Tidal Basin in West Potomac Park. In 1915, the United States government had responded with a gift of flowering dogwood trees to the people of Japan. In 1927, a group of American school children reenacted the initial planting; the first festival was held in 1935, sponsored by civic groups in the Nation's capital.

Three thousand eight hundred more trees were accepted in 1965 by First Lady Lady Bird Johnson. In 1981, the cycle of giving came full circle. Japanese horticulturists came to take cuttings from our trees to replace Yoshino cherry trees in Japan which had been destroyed in a flood. With this

return gift, the trees again fulfilled their roles as an agent of friendship. In the fall of 1999, it was the turn of the Tidal Basin's cherry trees to get a shot of new blood. The tree stand was rejuvenated with a new generation of cuttings from a famous Japanese cherry tree in Gifu province reputed to be over 1500 years old.

Mayor Yukio Ozaki, the far-seeing statesman of Japan, died in 1954 at the age of 95. He had an opportunity to visit Washington, D.C., in June of 1950, but he missed seeing his "Sakura" messengers of beauty, peace, and friendship in bloom. He lived long enough though to witness the transformation of Japan into one of the pillars of Western World and a staunch friend of the U.S.



Cherry trees in bloom in 2008 Japan