A BLOSSOMING OBSESSION

Cherry blossom season is a magical time of year at Kew. Biographer Naoko Abe explores its joys, and reveals how one man’s love for flowering cherries changed the face of spring.

Early bloomer

Prunus ‘Okeme’ has masses of pink, petite single flowers in early spring and is usually one of the first cherries to flower at Kew. Amateur horticulturist Collingwood Ingram artificially created this hybrid from two different species.

Photo: © Jacky Parker/Getty Images
You can’t help but be uplifted by the sight of cherry blossoms. They announce the timely arrival of spring with an inspirational array of candyfloss colours, shapes and fragrances. If you wander down Cherry Walk at Kew Gardens, between March and May, prepare to be lured into a wonderland of diversity and enchantment. Somehow the knowledge that the blossoms appear so fleetingly – typically lasting ten days to two weeks – only enhances their beauty.

Cherry blossoms are celebrated in one of the world’s oldest novels, *The Tale of Genji*, which was probably written a millennium ago in Japan. The country’s enduring passion for these flowers is reflected today in the *hanami* festival – in Japanese, *hana* means flower and *mi* means to see – where tens of millions of people picnic under the canopies of wispy pink and white blossoms. Special weather forecasts even track the progress of blossom time across the country. The *hanami* tradition is at least 1,200 years old: in the ancient capital of Kyoto, court aristocrats liked to party underneath the blossoms.

Throughout Japanese history, the cherry blossoms symbolised positive aspects of life, such as peace, love and fresh beginnings – both the school and business year begin in April in Japan. But the blossoms also signified life’s transience. Before and during World War II, the Japanese military used the symbolism of the blossoms’ short life to imbue a deadly ideology.

‘Without Ingram’s knowledge, passion and determination, Kew Gardens would look very different today’

**Sweet and fragrant**

*Prunus × yedoensis ‘Somei-yoshino’* is the most popular flowering cherry tree in Japan and produces almond-scented pale pink flowers, which fade to white.

You can see some in the Rose Garden at Kew.

Collingwood ‘Cherry’ Ingram created the hybrid *Prunus ‘Kursar’* (right)

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Ingram (below) brought back many cherry tree varieties from Japan to plant in his own garden

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**THE MAN WHO BROUGHT US BLOSSOMS**

The spectacle of fully opened blossoms on Kew’s 570 cherry trees owes a lot to a formidable British amateur horticulturist called Captain Collingwood Ingram, or ‘Cherry’ Ingram, as he is better known. He fell in love with Japanese flowering cherries in the 1920s when they were relatively unknown in the West and, he feared, at risk of extinction in Japan itself because the nation was entirely focused on modernisation and had no appetite to preserve cherry varieties.

Determined to save them, he travelled across the country on foot, on horseback and by ship and car to find different varieties.

Born in 1880 into a wealthy Victorian family, Ingram was a dedicated naturalist. As a boy, his passion was ornithology but he turned into a plantsman and became a world authority on flowering cherries. In 1919, he and his family moved to The Grange, a large house in the village of Benenden, Kent. On his cherry hunting trip to Japan in 1926, he brought back the scions, or branches, of cherry trees to graft and plant in his garden.

At its peak, it contained about 130 different cherry species and cultivars, the most in the world. From there, cherry blossoms spread to every corner of the United Kingdom.

Ingram’s book *Ornamental Cherries* (1947) was the definitive English-language guide to flowering cherry blossoms.

**TREE SAVIOUR**

The great white cherry (*Prunus ‘Taihaku’*) is a highlight of Cherry Walk for many visitors. This variety became extinct in Japan but was saved by Ingram, who spent five years trying to ensure its survival in its homeland. He rediscovered it growing in Sussex and after taking cuttings, reintroduced this beautiful
Double header

Collingwood Ingram brought the Japanese flowering cherry variety Prunus ‘Asano’ to Britain, after discovering the tree in Japan in 1926. Enjoy its clusters of double rose-pink flowers along Asano Avenue at Kew.

Follow Kew Gardens on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram (@KewGardens) for updates of when the cherry trees are in blossom.

And share your photos of cherry blossom at Kew on social media using #kewblossom

There are now 161 trees of 63 varieties and species on Cherry Walk and Asano Avenue.

Cherry blossom sling

Sip a spring cocktail

Stop for a refreshing tipple among the cherry blossoms. At Kew’s Pavilion Bar and Grill, you can try our Japanese inspired cherry blossom infused gin with grapefruit oils, pressed citrus, yuzu and soda. Served long, over ice with a blossom garnish.