

# 'The Sakura Obsession' Review: New Life for a Tree

In Japan, the cherry blossom is more than a plant—it is an emblem of national identity.

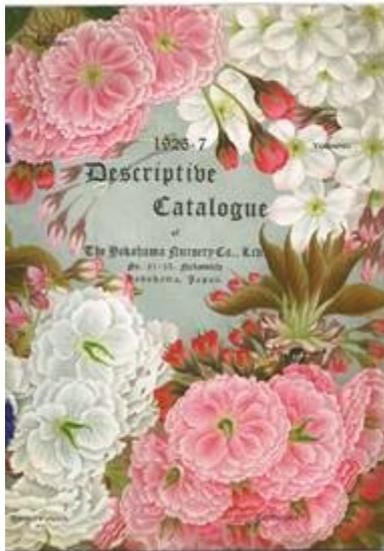
By

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In Western countries, we take the blooming of the cherry blossoms as just another sign of spring, like the budding of the forsythia and azaleas. But in Japan, where the flowering cherry, or sakura, has been cultivated for centuries, the blossom has a much deeper, and at times far darker, significance. In "The Sakura Obsession," Naoko Abe, a Japanese journalist living in London, grafts two improbable stories onto the same rootstock. One tale is of an English gentleman with little previous experience of gardening, who became a world authority on cherry trees. The other traces how, in its homeland, the gentle sakura was perverted from a symbol of life and renewal to one of destruction and death.

To the Japanese, the cherry blossom has always been more than a plant. In ancient times, farmers took its blooms as a signal to plant their rice. Around 800, Emperor Saga hosted a *hanami*, or cherry-viewing party, and aristocrats embraced the sakura as an emblem of national identity, extolling it in their poetry and planting it in their gardens.



The 1926-27 Yokohama Nursery Catalogue—Collingwood Ingram ordered extensively from the company during this period. PHOTO: THE YOKOHAMA NURSERY CO. LTD/RHS LINDLEY COLLECTIONS  
*THE SAKURA OBSESSION*

By Naoko Abe

*Knopf, 380 pages, \$27.95*

In the 17th century, after shogun Ieyasu Tokugawa consolidated his power, many feudal lords turned from internecine rivalry to milder pursuits. From the country's 10 wild species, they cultivated more than 400 varieties of flowering cherry (those grown mainly for their blossoms). Commoners were also enthralled by the sakura.

Unpretentious in color and form, deriving its effect not from showy individual blooms but from the massing of more modest ones, the flower was celebrated, in the words of one writer, as “the emblem of our character.”

In the late 19th century, Japan ended centuries of self-imposed isolation. In the 1860s, during the Meiji government's breakneck campaign to westernize, the sakura was promoted as a symbol of both modernity and loyalty to the emperor. The tree also became an instrument of Japanese diplomacy, displayed at international exhibitions and presented as gifts to friendly nations. In 1912 the mayor of Tokyo would donate 6,000 flowering cherries to the United States, where many were planted beside the Tidal Basin in Washington, D.C. All this contributed to a general passion in the

West for anything Japanese, from painting and pottery to theater and philosophy.

During the earlier stage of that craze, in 1880, Collingwood Ingram was born in London, son of Sir William Ingram, a member of parliament and managing director of the influential Illustrated London News. A sickly boy, tutored at home, Collingwood loved to tramp the cliffs and marshes around the family's country house at Westgate-on-Sea, near the English Channel, where he took special delight in the abundant birdlife.

Like many of his countrymen, young Collingwood was smitten with Japan, and in September 1902, just before he turned 22, he made his first visit to the country. Reveling in the flora and fauna, he was struck not by their exoticism but by their resemblance to species from home, like "old friends in a new guise." Five years later, Ingram returned to Japan on his honeymoon, but he left his bride, Florence, in Tokyo and spent three weeks birding on the slopes of Mt. Fuji.

Even during World War I, serving as a captain in the Royal Flying Corps, Ingram found time to identify 170 species of bird in the French countryside. But on returning to civilian life, he became disillusioned with ornithology as "a somewhat tired and exhausted science," overly concerned with abstruse details such as taxonomy and species distribution and not sufficiently attentive to the "living creature." He began to cast about for another interest.

In 1919 Collingwood, Florence and their children moved from Westgate-on-Sea to the village of Benenden, Kent, some 50 miles southeast of London. In the estate's dilapidated garden, Ingram discovered two ornamental cherry trees, which he appreciated for their "striking floral display" and their reminder of happy days in Japan. Although Japanese cherries had been introduced to England in the 1850s, they were still relatively unstudied there, and Ingram recognized the opportunity he'd been searching for. He would collect

as many species of flowering cherry as possible and become a leading authority.

In the coming decades, “Cherry” Ingram, as he became known, gathered specimens from around the globe, until he had amassed 500 trees and 120 varieties, the largest collection of sakura outside Japan. The first person in the world to hybridize cherry trees artificially, he shared his cultivars with other collectors in Britain and beyond. He published books and monographs and publicized his beloved cherries at every opportunity. He became, as Ms. Abe puts it, “a cherry-tree colossus.”

In 1926 Ingram made a third visit to Japan. But this time he was appalled that, as he wrote, “the commercialization of Japan has caused the cult of these beautiful trees to wane.” Hundreds of varieties had once been cultivated on the island; now just one, the easy-to-propagate Somei-yoshino, accounted for the lion’s share of all specimens grown. Some venerable lines were in danger of extinction, while others had already disappeared from their native land. One of these was the spectacular Taihaku, or Great White, which Ingram had earlier propagated in his garden in Kent. After several tries, he was able to reintroduce some cuttings to Japan, an achievement that Ms. Abe calls “legendary” among Western horticulturalists.

Like the sakura itself, Ms. Abe’s book is a quiet pleasure—the story of a venerated flower and an English squire graced with the means to turn his passion into his vocation. About the time that Ingram repatriates the Great White, in 1932, the narrative takes a somber turn, and the ancient cherry blossom assumes a sinister, patently 20th-century significance.

In Japan the sakura had always held a certain poignancy, not only as an emblem of renewal but, due to its short-lived blooms, as a reminder of mortality. In the 1930s, the country’s militaristic,

nationalist government chose to underscore the latter meaning. Classic poems were reinterpreted to emphasize the glory in dying for the emperor, just as cherry blossoms wither after a short but spectacular season. Soldiers who fell in the emperor's service were assured of being reborn as gods at Tokyo's Yasukuni Shrine, where hundreds of sakura were planted. The flower had already been incorporated into the badges of the imperial army and navy; during the coming war, it would be painted on the fuselages of kamikaze planes.

Afterward, as Japan rebuilt her devastated cities, masses of flowering cherries were planted and the sakura was recast yet again, as a symbol of national rebirth. Six thousand miles away, Britain was also rebuilding, and with the trees' Japanese roots now forgotten, tens of thousands of cherries were given pride of place along roadways, public parks and private gardens. Collingwood Ingram had passed the war in Kent, as commander of his village's Home Guard. But he had kept up his work on the sakura, and in 1948 published "Ornamental Cherries," which was recognized as the definitive English-language guide to the subject. In the coming years, as Ingram's health declined, so did his cherry collection; by the 1970s, fewer than 50 trees remained, representing just 23 varieties.

Collingwood Ingram died in May 1981, at the age of 100. But, Ms. Abe assures us, "the cherries that Ingram gathered and grafted are now an integral part of the British countryside and the urban environment." Ingram's "broader legacy was to spread a diverse cherry-tree culture almost single-handedly across the British Isles and the world at large." Not bad for an amateur.