

# Sakura Cherry Tree Project-The Varieties by Yoko Kawaguchi

There are three varieties of flowering cherries being planted across the UK as part of the Sakura Cherry Tree Project: *Prunus x yedoensis* 'Somei-Yoshino', *P.* 'Taihaku' and *Prunus* 'Beni-yutaka' (syn. *P.* 'Matsumae-beni-yutaka'). With their staggered blooming times, they should provide a wonderful display all through April. All three have been accorded the Award of Garden Merit by the RHS.

## 'Somei-Yoshino'

The first to open in late March in Japan, early April in the UK, is the 'Somei-Yoshino', also known as the 'Yoshino cherry' (Figure 1). It has been the most popular cultivar in Japan for over a century, accounting for, by some accounts, 80% of all flowering cherries grown in that country. This is the cherry whose flowering is eagerly followed each

spring through the national weather forecast, as the cherry-viewing season progresses across Japan from the southern tip of the island of Kyūshū to the southern half of Hokkaidō, the northernmost of Japan's main islands. On its arching branches, the 'Somei-Yoshino' produces its fragrant flowers before its leaves, creating clouds of white blossom (see the article on page 2, 'Sakura and the Japanese').

## 'Taihaku'

'Taihaku' is a cultivar which symbolises the deep horticultural links shared between the UK and Japan (Figure 2). It was believed to have been lost in Japan by the beginning of the 20th century. The British ornithologist and flowering-cherry expert Collingwood Ingram, who, among his collection of cherries, had an unidentified variety producing

very large white flowers that he had propagated from an ailing specimen in the Sussex garden of an acquaintance of his, recognised the flower in an album of old drawings of cherry blossoms he was shown on a trip to Japan in 1926. Ingram's cherry was dubbed 'Taihaku' (the 'Great White') by his Japanese friend and fellow ornithologist Takatsukasa Nobusuke. In 1932, cuttings from this tree were sent to Japan, where the 'Taihaku' has since become firmly established. It is a handsome tree, eventually forming a broad spreading crown. 'Taihaku' is now thought to be genetically the same cherry as another cultivar in Japan known as 'Koma-tsunagi', although confusingly there seems formerly to have another 'Koma-tsunagi' with different-looking flowers.



**Figure 1.** For many Japanese people sakura is synonymous with this cultivar, the 'Somei-Yoshino'. The petal of the flowering cherry is distinguished by a tiny notch at its tip (Source: Sakurai Midori, 10 April, 2005; Wikimedia Commons: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Someiyoshino.JPG>). [Accessed 22/02/2021]



**Figure 2.** 'Taihaku' produces the biggest single flowers of any flowering cherry variety. The bronze-red leaves emerge at the same time as the flowers, in mid-April in the UK, then later turn dark green., (Source: SLIMHANNYA, 8 April, 2020; Wikipedia: <https://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/タイハク?oldformat=true#/media/ファイル:Taihaku.jpg>). [Accessed 22/02/2021]

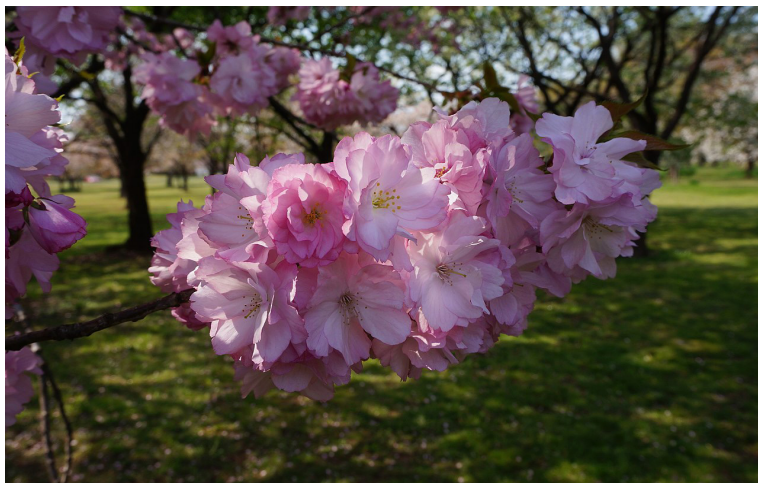
### 'Beni-yutaka'

'Beni-yutaka', which produces loosely double flowers opening white, later turning vibrant pink with a dark centre, was bred by Asari Masatoshi in 1961 in Matsumae, Hokkaidō (Figure 3). Matsumae, located at the southernmost tip of the island, had the only castle on Hokkaidō during the Edo Period and functioned as an outpost of the Tokugawa Shogunate. Flowering cherries were brought there from other parts of Japan. One of the most famous of the old cherries in Matsumae is the Kechi'myaku-zakura, which grows in front of the main hall (Hondō) of the Buddhist temple Kōzen-ji. It is one of the earliest cherries to flower in Matsumae, hence the variety which has been propagated from this original tree is known as the 'Matsumae-hayazaki'

(the 'Matsumae early-flowering' cherry), opening around the same time as the 'Somei-Yoshino' in late April into May, a month later than in southern Japan. 'Matsumae-hayazaki' is derived from the clove cherry, *P. apetala* var. *tetsuyae* (known as the *chōji-zakura* in Japanese), as well as the *Ōshima-zakura* (*P. speciosa*) and the *yama-zakura* (*P. jamasakura*). Asari used this cherry extensively in his hybridisation programme, and it is the parent of many of the more than 100 cultivars, including 'Beni-yutaka', which he has bred since 1959. Asari's Matsumae cultivars were introduced to the UK in the 1990s. They have been planted at Kew Gardens and Windsor Great Park.

The Kechi'myaku-zakura produces vivid pink flowers with a deep pink centre. There is a legend that it

had originally been brought from Mt Yoshino in Nara Prefecture, but a priest of Kōzen-ji, wanting to enlarge the main hall, decided the cherry tree had to go. The night before the tree was to be chopped down, a beautiful young maiden is said to have appeared before the priest to beg for a kechi'myaku, since she was about to die and the priest's kechi'myaku would allow her to be reborn in the Amida Buddha's Pure Land of the West. Kechi'myaku literally means 'bloodline' (and refers to the colour of the blossoms on this cherry), but it was also a Buddhist document that certified that the bearer was a true disciple of a particular Buddhist priest. The following morning the priest, according to the tale, found the document attached to a branch of the cherry tree and realising that the maiden had been the spirit of the cherry, preserved the tree.



**Figure 3.** 'Beni-yutaka' flowers from mid- to late April in the UK, but in its hometown of Matsumae from late April into May. Its leaves, which open bronzy-green, later turn dark green and finally a fiery red, tinted orange, in the autumn (Source: SLIMHANNYA, 8 April, 2020; Wikimedia Commons: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Beniyutaka2.jpg>). [Accessed 15/02/2021]

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