

Van Hage Garden Article

Prunus 'Flowering Cherries'

As fleeting and ephemeral as life itself, 'cherry blossom' or sakura as it's known in Japan, begins a season of rebirth and celebration.

Brief and brilliantly beautiful, the annual flowering of the genus *Prunus* is a long-awaited symbol of spring, richly depicted in paintings, poems, songs and ceramics. Though in this country, save a courteous nod at its well-timed blooms, we have failed to embrace the trees symbolism or jubilee.

Camped out on picnic blankets spread beneath the falling petals, for centuries Japanese society has celebrated with hanami, or 'cherry blossom viewing' parties held beneath the blooming branches.

With more than 300 different cultivars, most of which bloom for just a few days at a time, a massive cherry blossom 'front' or sakura zensen spreads northwards from Okinawa to Kyoto and Tokyo. Nightly forecasts by the Japanese Meteorological Agency track the blizzard of blossom, as it billows its way across the archipelago. Huge numbers turn out to view the natural spectacle, crowded into parks, shrines and temples; often vying for the best positions, as the flowering proceeds to higher altitudes, driven by warm spring winds.

Winter sakura begins with *Prunus subhirtella* 'Autumnalis', a most successful variety here in the UK. Tiny-fringed blooms smatter the branches from autumn to spring in mild spells, culminating in a flurry of delicate pink by February. Following close on its heels, *Prunus* 'Okame' bears masses of carmine-pink blooms, followed by brilliant autumn leaf colour.

Not all 'flowering cherries' are cherries – some are actually plums, almonds or apricots – classified as stone fruit. *Prunus mume*, the 'Japanese Apricot' forms a delightful small tree, with single almond-scented flowers paling with age. Normally blooms open in March, occasionally as early as January or late as April, as weather dictates.

Slim-line and elegant, *Prunus* 'Amanagowa', the 'Maypole Cherry', is a superb tree for the smaller garden. Columnar in habit, erect branches bare fragrant shell pink loosely double flowers and fresh green leaves. By autumn, the foliage turns bright yellow and orange, creating a very attractive little specimen.

Prunus cerasifera, the 'Cherry plum', forms a small tree with myriads of tiny white flowers crowding the branches in March, with dark leaved 'Nigra' complimenting delicate shell-pink flowers with beetroot red leaves. Likewise, *P. x cistena*, the 'Purple-leaf Sand Cherry', may double as a useful hedging plant, reaching just 2m high.

There are cherries for height, with one of our most attractive native woodland trees, *Prunus avium* - aptly named the 'Bird Cherry', producing plentiful reddish-purple bitter tasting fruits that are relished by thrushes and blackbirds. From this species, most of the edible 'Sweet Cherries' are derived, along with double white 'Plena', wreathed in garlands of drooping flowers. 'The Great White Cherry', *P.* 'Tai Haku' makes a robust tree up to 12m, with single, dazzling white flowers and rich coppery new leaves.

Perhaps the most strikingly coloured of all the cherries, semi-double P. 'Fukubana' shouts rose-madder flowers late in the spring. While famously flamboyant, 'Cheels Weeping' (syn. Prunus 'Kiku-shidare Sakura') cascades pink pompom blooms over branches that fall to the ground.

Refreshingly different, with the zest of spring, pale yellow-tinged green 'Ukon' freely flowers semi-double, against bronze-brown young leaves. Common 'Kanzan' is one of the most widely planted and popular ornamental cherries; stiffly Y-shaped branches broaden with age, holding showy double, purplish-pink petals and copper-red young leaves.

Last of all, P. 'Shirofugen' makes a strong-growing wide tree, with large double purple-pink buds first opening white, then staining pink once more. Contrasting copper-coloured young foliage make a striking show, melting the blossom blizzard with plentiful summer foliage.

Of course, the season is over all too soon, but that's what makes it so special. As the Japanese have long believed, not a moment should be wasted in appreciation, as a tree passed by today could be showering its petals tomorrow – indeed a metaphor for life itself.

IN THE GARDEN THIS WEEK...

- An electric fan heater, set to 'frost watch' will keep your greenhouse or conservatory safely frost free. Turn up the heat to start off seedlings, or use the fan alone, without heat, to circulate air and maintain a healthy growing environment during the summer months.
- Stock up on plant labels. Reusable white plastic labels with pencil or pen will save confusion over similar varieties and flowering times.
- Autumn sown Sweet Peas shoot away quickly as spring sunshine warms daytime temperatures – move outdoors and harden off in a ventilated cold frame, ready for planting out.
- Tie-in climbers and wall plants that have become detached from their supports, before new growth begins.