



Douglas's Blog Archives

by Douglas Justice, UBC Botanical Garden

These articles by Douglas Justice, one of the horticulturists on VCBF's Team Sakura, have led off the Scouts' Reports, starting with the 2007 cherry viewing season.

April 22, 2007

Even people who don't notice flowers must surely be impressed with the City's 'Kanzan' cherries. This venerable cultivar vastly outnumbers all other cherry trees on Vancouver's streets and it's easy to see why. 'Kanzan' is a comparatively large tree and people are attracted to its enormous clusters of big, bright pink pompom flowers. The blossoms are long-lasting—double flowers generally hold up for weeks even as the weather warms. Some people find the colour of its blooms brash and the trees too massive, preferring the subtler, more understated cultivars that populate the earlier part of the season, but there's no denying that an overwhelming majority of the public loves the personality of this cherry.

But 'Kanzan' isn't the only cherry in flower now. At Nitobe Memorial Garden, 'Jo-nioi' ("supreme scent") is blooming next to 'Shogetsu' ("moonlight through pine trees"), and with names like those, you know these are worth checking out. More commonly planted Sato-zakura blossoming now include 'Pink Perfection', 'Daikoku' (one of the seven Chinese gods of fortune) and 'Ukon'. The upright growing 'Amanogawa' ("heaven's river") is absolutely sublime this year with its clusters of big apple-blossom flowers held close along its ascending stems. There are scattered individuals in Vancouver but for street plantings, you have to visit Eighth Avenue in New Westminster. Among late cherries, one of

my favourites is Shiro-fugen (also known as 'Fugenzo'), a cherry that follows the blooming of 'Kanzan' by about two weeks. There is a major planting of this cultivar on the Cambie Heritage Boulevard south of 49th Avenue. Unfortunately, these particular trees had the profound misfortune of being located next to one of the city's largest construction projects—the excavation for the Canada Line—and it's not certain whether the damage they've sustained might not eventually do them in. 'Shiro-fugen' has a distinctive spreading, flat-topped crown and the darkest emerging leaves of any cherry that I know. Pink flower buds expand as the purple-brown leaves unfold, but the fully double blossoms open pure white. The leaves eventually turn green but the show actually continues for weeks, finally culminating in the white flowers turning pink before they fall.

The end of the cherry blossoms always seems terribly anti-climactic to me—anticipation is so much more exciting than reflection. How did it go this year? Whose flowers were the biggest, the pinkest, the longest lasting? I feel the experience of cherry blossom viewing is a contemplative, poetic celebration of the ephemeral. The mental tallying of qualities seems superficial and tawdry, like a cheap beauty contest where real personalities are obscured. Each cherry has its own character. Some are exuberant and spectacular in youth, some only attractive in age. Very few are consistently attractive and well-behaved and some are only appreciated by a small cadre of cherry nuts. A number are sulky and seemingly without much appeal for years at a time—you wonder why they were planted at all—but then, one fine spring, they dazzle you. The blossoms are nearly done, but who knows what a cherry will give us in another year.

April 19, 2007

The radio commentators said on Friday that the weather was November-like, but I don't think these people get outside much. November smells of wet, dead leaves. To my nose, the air at this time of year is infused with so much floral matter that spring is self-evident, no matter the weather. Sure, yesterday was cool and blustery. Frustrating for cherry blossom viewing, for sure; but doesn't lousy weather allow time for a bit of reading? Of course, cherry research can be a double-edged activity. It can lead to vindication of a previous identification or a further descent into the complexities of nomenclature, Japanese history or obscure botanical differentiations. My exciting, recent discovery of 'Surugadai-nioi', for example, fell like a house of cards when I casually opened Kuitert's book at '**Washi-no-o**' ("eagle's tail"—so named because of the ragged-edged

petals). Uh oh. How did I miss that? 'Washi-no-o' is clearly the correct identification for the tree I was waxing on about last week. Somehow, I got hung up on the "flowers with petaloids" vs. "flowers without petaloids" couplet in Arie Peterse's usually very helpful dichotomous key. My apologies to 'Surugadai-nioi' devotees.

This week, the 300' row of '**Tai-haku**' (great white cherry) at the entrance to UBC Botanical Garden is in spectacular bloom—spectacular despite the trees being planted only last year. I love the simple beauty of this cultivar. Single white flowers, the largest of any cherry, emerge from soft-pink buds. The blossoms contrast with bronzy emerging leaves. In deep, moisture retentive soil, 'Tai-haku' forms a canopy with few, long, sturdy branches, and can become an immense, spreading tree, while in more difficult conditions, such as on typical street plantings, a denser, more compact crown develops, but with no less abundance of bloom.

Two other cultivars sometimes confused with 'Tai-haku' are flowering now. '**Ukon**' has a similar crown shape, but the semi-double blossoms are smaller and have a distinctive yellowish cast. The Japanese name means "turmeric," as though a light dusting on white flowers would create this effect. Driving along 16th Avenue, you can see 'Ukon' planted in the centre boulevard between Macdonald and Blenheim and 'Tai-haku' between Dunbar and Crown. The other is '**Mikaruma-gaeshi**' (the appropriately evocative, "royal carriage returns"), which has exquisite mostly 5-petaled flowers nearly as large as those of the great white cherry. Like 'Takasago' (still in bloom at this writing), 'Mikaruma-gaeshi' produces its apple-blossom flowers in dense clusters on spurs, but this cultivar develops sparse, sinuous branches with flowers that face the viewer directly. Close up, these flowers will take your breath away, as they have done since the 15th century in Japan. The 700 block west 63rd is a good display. But like 'Takasago', 'Mikaruma-gaeshi' occasionally suffers the ravages of brown rot on its tightly clustered flowers. I can think of no crueler irony than a blight on this venerable, beautiful Sato-zakura; however, I've seen no sign of the dreaded disease this year, so enjoy the splendour while you can.

April 12, 2007

Cherry blossom season is really heating up now. My desk is piled with branches, flowers and reference books, and my email correspondence getting progressively more cherry-centric. All of my other activities are gradually, inexorably, shrinking in significance. But what could be more important than cherry blossoms? It seems to take me longer

each day to get through my work, and especially to make the drive home in a reasonable amount of time (April brings the evening light, and there are so many cherries to see between UBC and home). Don't I have to check on reports of interesting finds, of cultivars flowering earlier or later than normal and of unidentified or unusual trees?

Today, one of our particularly enthusiastic cherry scouts brought me a sample of *Prunus* 'Takasago', a Sato-zakura (village cherry) more commonly known by the invalid name *P. sieboldii* var. *caespitosa*. This is a lovely tree in flower, but weird in its thick, upright branches and tightly clustered flowers. The semi-double flowers are apple-blossom-like—pink in bud, opening to white—and lightly fragrant, but so tightly clustered around the twigs that brown rot disease is common on this cultivar. The extra humidity caused by poor air circulation makes it susceptible to this moisture-loving, disfiguring disease. This year, despite all of the precipitation we endured in March, flowering so far appears to be outstanding. There are now very few streets where 'Takasago' still has a presence; however, you can find several specimens on Vine Street between 41st and 49th Avenues. For some reason, that neighbourhood is particularly rich in cherries and I've found myself being watched suspiciously as I slowly drive around, periodically leaping out of the car to pull and prod at various trees. Note to self: Make sure to have I.D. and a good character reference to call when cherry viewing.

In the same area, I stumbled across three specimens of what I'm sure must be *Prunus* 'Surugadai-nioi', a richly fragrant, white flowered selection of the Oshima cherry (*Prunus jamasakura* var. *speciosa*). The name refers to a particular hill in Tokyo known as "Surugadai." The epithet "-nioi" means scent. This cultivar is notable not only for its fragrance, which is impressive (like crushed almonds), and for its tongue-twisting name, but for its characteristic ragged-edged petals. Finally, an even less commonly encountered Sato-zakura recently arrived on my desk. This one is called 'Ojochin', which means "large lantern," so named for its big, inflated flower buds (don't you love the poetry of Japanese names?). This cultivar has been known since the late seventeenth century in Japan. While I've never seen it planted on Vancouver's streets or in its parks, there is a specimen at Nitobe Memorial Garden at UBC. The mostly single flowers are soft pink and quite large. The one at Nitobe is small and overhangs a pathway above the pond. I think it's worth seeing, particularly before the flowers open, but it might be too subtle for some.

April 5, 2007

This is the season we've all been waiting for. I'm talking about **Somei-yoshino cherry blossom viewing**, which is the kind that's famous in Japan and in Washington, DC. This joyous activity actually started two weeks ago in areas of the West End and downtown. Somei-yoshino (*Prunus ×yedoensis*), which in North America is known simply as Yoshino, is actually pretty rare in Vancouver, except for a few street plantings and around UBC. The more common cultivar of *P. ×yedoensis* is 'Akebono', the daybreak cherry, and it's the one that stands in for Somei-yoshino in Vancouver. Despite its name, 'Akebono' is virtually unknown in Japan, having arisen as a chance seedling in a California nursery in 1925. Somei-yoshino and 'Akebono' are similar and much confused, but 'Akebono' is more densely branched and a bit stiffer, with slightly pinker flowers. Age, sun exposure, soil quality and tree health all seem to have an effect on these characteristics; perhaps the only sure-fire distinction is that 'Akebono' frequently displays an extra petal in its normally 5-petaled flowers, whereas Somei-yoshino does not. You want magnificent? Try the park at Kitsilano Beach (Cornwall at Yew Street).

I could go on about the virtues of these particular cherries—and I have done in articles and presentations over the years—but I won't now, because the airwaves are filled with their praises, and there are other cherries to talk about. For instance: 'Umineko' is a lovely, strongly upright growing cherry that produces its single white flowers at the same time as its fresh green leaves emerge. It is quite rare in Vancouver, but I think it deserves to be more widely grown. The name means "seagull," the ragged-edged flowers suggesting wing-tips, I suppose. There is a handsome trio on the west side of Oak Street just below 70th Avenue that I see nearly every day on my commute. There is usually plenty of time to gaze about near that intersection, the traffic being heavy and the traffic light seldom being in my favour.

A cherry imbued with a somewhat more "yin," or feminine sensitivity, is the cultivar 'Shirotae', also known as the Mount Fuji cherry. This is one of my favourite cherries. Like 'Umineko', 'Shirotae' produces its flowers and leaves together, the emerging foliage intensifying the whiteness of the flowers. But 'Shirotae' produces delicate, fully double blossoms that hang in opulent clusters (corymbs, technically) from wide, horizontal branches. The flowers are fragrant, smelling sweetly of almonds. You'd think 'Shirotae' would be more popular, but the branches spread so much that most street plantings can't accommodate the space. This cultivar is still yet to burst into bloom in

most places outside of the West End, but an early-flowering group is under the protection of a building overhang on Maple at West Broadway (northeast corner); a park-like planting of 'Shirotae' is at Regent College on UBC campus at Wesbrook and University Boulevard. This is the kind of cherry that you can walk up and stick your nose into. Go ahead. I do.

March 29, 2007

Be careful what you wish for. I used to dream of being able to roam around Vancouver's streets in springtime, looking at cherry trees, taking pictures; making a proper study of all of that beauty. It was part selfish desire to collect—to possess—cherry information, and part personal soapbox for the promotion of the city's underappreciated arboreal splendor. Every May, I used to think, "I've missed them again—maybe next year." Other activities always seemed to intervene. Anytime somebody mentioned flowering cherries, I'd feel guilty. Oh, brother. Who's obsessive-compulsive now? Recently, I started to let go. I got used to the idea that I wouldn't be the cherry king. Maybe I can just enjoy them casually, like normal people do; celebrate the ephemeral nature of cherry blossoms in a passive, relaxed kind of way. Chill, as it were.

Then comes the Cherry Blossom Festival: What a tornado of an idea. Cherry aficionados appearing out of the woodwork identifying trees, dedicated cherry scouts fanning out across Vancouver giving blow-by-blow accounts of the different waves of blossoms, emailed images flying back and forth, study sessions, copious notes being kept... What do I see? We have a community of people who love cherry blossoms and a way for them to come together. There are young people involved—young people! Institutions, organizations, and especially volunteers are all contributing to make it happen. It isn't about competitions or self-congratulatory experts, or even unassuming experts, it's about anybody celebrating and sharing the beauty of Vancouver's cherry blossoms with other people. Thanks, Linda.

March 22, 2007

It isn't until the Ides of March that Vancouver starts to notice its cherry blossoms. This is the time when it generally starts to feel more like springtime. As temperatures rise, most of the deciduous plants we see around us respond by bud expansion. We see the flower buds getting fatter and turning colour, so we anticipate their opening. I get a slightly giddy feeling when I look at flower buds, like the dopamine

receptors in my brain are getting revved up for bud break. Of course, the actual viewing of cherry blossoms is when the receptors get the workout. It's not surprising that people describe cherries and cherry viewing in spiritual terms, such as "transcendent," "heavenly" or "sublime." I start feeling this way in January, with the 'Autumnalis' cherries.

On the other hand, there are cherries that aren't so much transcendent as startling. One such is the cultivar 'Accolade', which is flowering now. Most years in Vancouver, 'Accolade' is in flower in February, but this winter has been tough on the early bloomers. I particularly like 'Accolade' for its double, unapologetically bright pink flowers. Its delicately branched, wide spreading crown adds considerably to its charm, but let's be honest: people are attracted to the pizzazz factor. On a dark day, 'Accolade' can light up a city block, or maybe even City Hall.

March 15, 2007

People sometimes ask me why the really early flowering cherries are not more popular in Vancouver. I remember driving down Nanaimo Street on a particularly mild, drippy, late winter day some years ago and being completely floored by the beauty of the winter cherries (*Prunus ×subhirtella* 'Autumnalis' and *P. ×subhirtella* 'Autumnalis Rosea') planted down both sides of the street. Ahead of me, solid, grey clouds parted to reveal the full height of the misty North Shore mountains; a scene attractive enough in itself, but descending through swarms of white and pink blossoms, the view was, well, transcendent. Ah, Vancouver rain. Years later, I remember those trees looking not so great. Indeed, the majority have now been removed.

Brown rot is particularly devastating to *P. ×subhirtella* (Higan or spring cherry) cultivars, infecting the flowers and newest twigs, and leaving them wizened and black. The disease spreads easily by rain-splashed spores. Regrowth from behind damaged buds is unnaturally congested. Together with the retention of infected tissues, the disease produces conditions that are ideal for reinfection. Another disease, bacterial canker, also attacks these trees (and most other cherries, too), forming large lumpy growths on stems and blighting the branch tips. Infected trees are more susceptible to pests, and drought-stressed trees are prone to all kinds of problems. Not surprisingly, with our wet, mild winters and dry summers, decline can be rapid.

The good news is that with proper planting (in well-drained, summer

irrigated soil, with exposure to full sun and good air circulation) and careful, regular removal of diseased branches, early flowering cherries can be successfully grown in Vancouver. *Prunus* ×*subhirtella* 'Whitcomb' and 'Accolade' (a *P.* ×*subhirtella* hybrid), and *P.* ×*subhirtella* itself (which are all blooming now), as well as the earlier 'Autumnalis' pair, are beautiful trees that deserve to be grown. What could be finer than seeing our beautiful flowering cherries featured in the Toronto papers in January?

March 8, 2007

The Early Cherries

Some cherries produce their flowers so early we don't even notice them. In January, we generally have umbrellas up, or our heads down, avoiding the wind and rain, and we seldom think to look at the trees. There are two common winter-flowering cherries around Vancouver: *Prunus* ×*subhirtella* 'Autumnalis' with white flowers and *P.* ×*subhirtella* 'Autumnalis Rosea' with pink flowers. In Japan, these are more commonly known by the more poetic, *Jugatsu-zakura* (cherry of the 10th month). As the name implies, these cherries can produce flowers from October onwards, but locally, blooms are usually seen during milder periods between Christmas and mid-February.

All *Prunus* ×*subhirtella* (spring cherries) are attractive when in full bloom, but the later opening cultivars are showier than those that flower in January or earlier. Warmer temperatures seem to coax more flowers to open at once. An exceptional spring cherry that blooms dependably in mid to late February is Whitcomb cherry, *P.* ×*subhirtella* 'Whitcomb'. From masses of purple-pink buds, the mostly 5-petaled flowers of this cherry slowly expand and lighten, until they reach a crescendo of brilliant, deep pink. The flowers are displayed in tight clusters especially near the drooping branch tips of this medium sized tree. Whitcomb cherry is named for the Seattle-area gardener, David Whitcomb (1879-1966) in whose garden it was first recorded. This cultivar is occasionally offered commercially and is found in a number of neighbourhoods around Vancouver and especially in western Washington.