

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 'Okame' 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.

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.

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

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

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



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.

Today, you can enjoy *hanami* in many parts of Kew (see page 28 for a guide to where to walk). The most famous area, Cherry Walk, dates back to the beginning of the 20th century when William Jackson Bean, later to become the Arboretum’s curator, started planting the trees.

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. His 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

tree to the world. He was also responsible for bringing the 'Asano' variety to Britain – you can see these dark-pink chrysanthemum-like cherries in Asano Avenue next to the Temperate House at Kew. Ingram found the tree in a village near Mount Fuji in 1926 during the last of his three trips to Japan. He named 'Asano' after the samurai hero, Naganori Asano, of the *Forty-Seven Ronin* saga.

Ingram discovered Kew Gardens as a child. He often came to the Gardens when visiting the London home of his father, William, a Liberal politician who owned the *Illustrated London News*. A lifelong devotee of Kew, Ingram worked closely with its directors, curators and researchers for 60 years. Documents preserved in Kew's Archives show that the Gardens played an important role in enabling Ingram to create his cherry garden, sending him grafts of varieties, and that he provided staunch support for Kew's own collection in return.

In August 1923, for example, Ingram sent seeds of the Himalayan cherry (*Prunus cerasoides* also known as *P. puddum*) to Bean. Accompanying the parcel was a hand-written note that read: 'If you succeed in raising plants, perhaps you will be able to let me have a few if mine fail. I am most anxious to get hold of this beautiful cherry.' Ingram sent living specimens from his garden to Kew too. One, dispatched in 1927, was a clove cherry (*P. apetala*), a species that Ingram first introduced to England.

CREATING NEW CHERRIES

He was the first person in the world to artificially produce hybrids of cherries. Two notable successes came about only because the tropical Taiwan cherry (*Prunus campanulata*) grew in the Temperate House. Keen to create something of unusual beauty, he hybridised the Taiwan cherry with the Kurile cherry (*P. nipponica* var. *kurilensis*) to form what he named 'Kursar'. (This couldn't have happened naturally because they grew thousands of miles apart.) Ingram also created 'Okame', a cross between the Fuji

species (*P. incisa*) and the Taiwan cherry, which he named after a Japanese goddess of good fortune and mirth.

Creating these hybrids was a painstaking, intricate process. In his writings, Ingram described how he collected pollen from the Temperate House. When the Taiwan cherry was blossoming, he shook the pollen from the flower's ripe anthers onto pieces of tissue paper, folded the papers carefully and placed them in a Thermos flask, with a pinch of calcium chloride at the bottom to absorb any humidity. Then he kept the pollen dry for several weeks until the Kurile or Fuji species were ready to be fertilised.

Ingram died, at the ripe old age of 100, in 1981. Without his knowledge, passion and determination, Kew Gardens – and, for that matter, the entire landscape of Britain – would look very different today. To understand why he was so dedicated – and why Kew was so delighted to help him – all you have to do is let the blossoms work their magic.

Naoko Abe is a journalist and author of the acclaimed book 'Cherry' Ingram: The Englishman Who Saved Japan's Blossoms. Look out for the new paperback edition, published by Vintage, in Kew's shops from 19 March, RRP £10.99

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.

Photo: P. Tomlins/Alamy/Stock Photo



Take a cherry blossom walk

Here's where to see beautiful blossom displays in the Gardens – whatever time you've got to spare

Photos: Christina Harrison, Andrew McRobb, Jeff Eden, Ellen Michale/RBC Kew, Svetia Zarzamora/AdobeStock



5 minutes

From Victoria Plaza, walk to the Rose Garden behind the Palm House (above) to see some of Kew's newest cherries. In May 2017, a cherry-loving group from Gifu prefecture in Japan donated 35 trees of the popular 'Someiyoshino' variety to Kew as a symbol of friendship. These trees add stunning seasonal colour to this part of the Gardens.



15 minutes

From the Rose Garden stroll along Cherry Walk. The Great Storm of October 1987 severely damaged the cherries and the current Cherry Walk was laid out in the early 1990s, with the help of the Sakura Bank of Japan. Continue past King William's Temple and beyond towards the Temperate House – here you'll find Asano Avenue (above and main picture).



20-25 minutes

Continue through the Temperate House for the final stretch of Cherry Walk towards the Pagoda. Here you'll find a wonderful selection of varieties, including *Prunus* 'Mikuruma-gaeshi' (above), *P.* 'Ichiyo', and *P.* 'Hokusai' with its pale-pink blossoms (Collingwood Ingram named it after the Japanese printmaker Katsushika Hokusai). This is a great spot for a picnic too.



25 minutes+

From the end of Cherry Walk, it's just a short step to the tranquil Japanese Landscape where you can contemplate the *Chokushi-Mon* (Gateway of the Imperial Messenger) and see the great white cherry (*Prunus* 'Taihaku') (above), with its showy pure-white blooms, which was saved by Ingram. You'll also find *P.* 'Collingwood Ingram' here.

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 tippie 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.

