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The man who saved JAPANESE CHERRY BLOSSOM



'Cherry' Ingram was an Englishman who became the world's leading expert on cherry trees. Hugh St Clair explores his beautiful legacy

At this time of year, the arrival of cherry blossom is a cause for great celebration in Japan and people throw parties all over the country under a colourful canopy. Tourists from around the world come to join in, and the shops are full of cherry blossom-scented perfumes and teas, and floral Japanese tableware. In 2015, during his Royal Tour of Japan, HRH Prince William planted a spectacular great white or Taihaku variety in the presence of the Emperor. In rural areas the emergence of the pink and white petals has always been a signal for farmers to plant rice, and poets and artists have represented the blossoms through the centuries. But it is unlikely that there would have been any festival for the flowers at all if it wasn't for a wealthy and cultured English gardener and cherry tree grower, Collingwood Ingram.

During the latter part of 19th century the cherry blossom had come to represent something more sinister. In a country that had wars to fight, the white Someiyoshino variety had been hijacked to attract men to join the military and appeared in the insignia of the army and the navy. This appropriation led to the abandonment of the cherry as symbol of life and joy; many other varieties were cut down – and some became extinct.

In Europe there was, conversely, a love of all things Japanese, from plants to art and household furnishings, and Ingram decided to honeymoon there in 1907. On a previous trip five years earlier, he wrote: 'I have had no time to do else than stand agape and watch the different vistas pass away without record in my journal. A brief fortnight has left me with more memory pictures than months of travel elsewhere.'

'Poets and artists have represented the blossoms through the centuries'



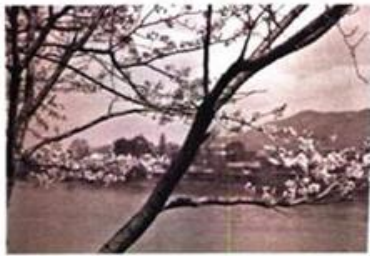
Top: Ingram aged 99 in 1980. **Above left:** A Sargent cherry leaf from Ingram's notebooks. **Above right:** Ingram in Japan, 1926. **Left:** Notebook illustration, 1915



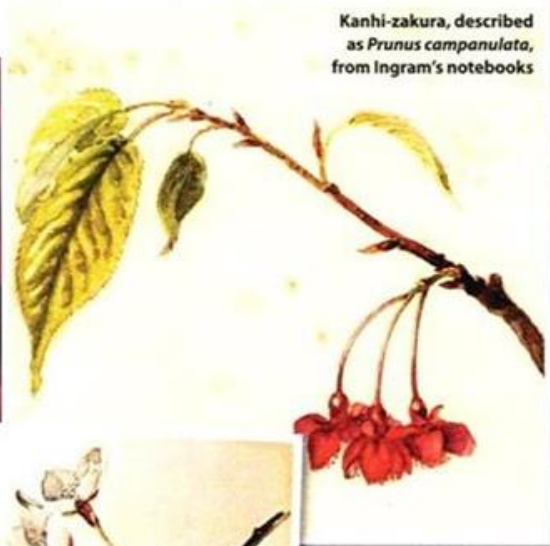
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Above: Kursar, cultivated by Ingram from wild cherry species, in Chris Lane's nursery, Kent. Below: Described by Ingram as 'Yoshino cherry in Uji', the tree is thought to be Somei-yoshimo



Kanhi-zakura, described as *Prunus campanulata*, from Ingram's notebooks



Left: Ingram's painting of a Taihaku. Below left: An illustration from Ingram's notebook, 1925. Below right: Kiyomizu temple in Kyoto. Bottom: Yamazakura sketched in Ingram's notebooks, 1939



On their return to England the newly married couple bought The Grange in Benenden in Kent, and set to work to restore the garden. By chance in the overgrown garden he found two mature ornamental cherry trees, rare in England because trees that couldn't bear fruit were not prized in Europe and were disparagingly called 'false cherries'.

The pink froth across the trees brought back happy memories for Ingram and he set about learning as much as he could about the varieties of flowering cherry. By 1926, he was a world authority on them and was asked to address the Cherry Association in Japan on their national tree. On this visit Ingram met an elderly man with a white, flowing beard, robe and clogs who was known as 'the fountain-head of cherry lore', Seisaku Funatsu. He showed Ingram a scroll his grandfather had painted of more than 120 varieties of cherry - many of which had become extinct, including the prized Taihaku.

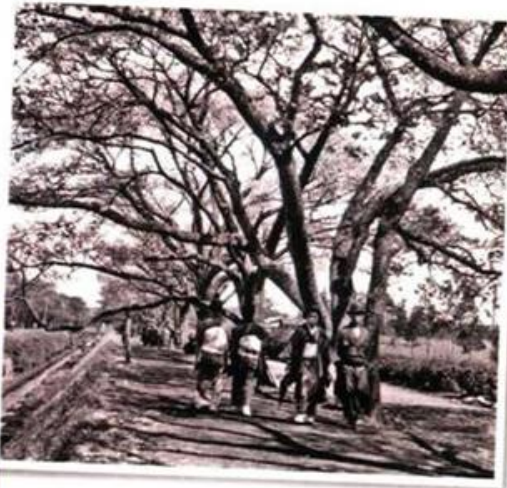
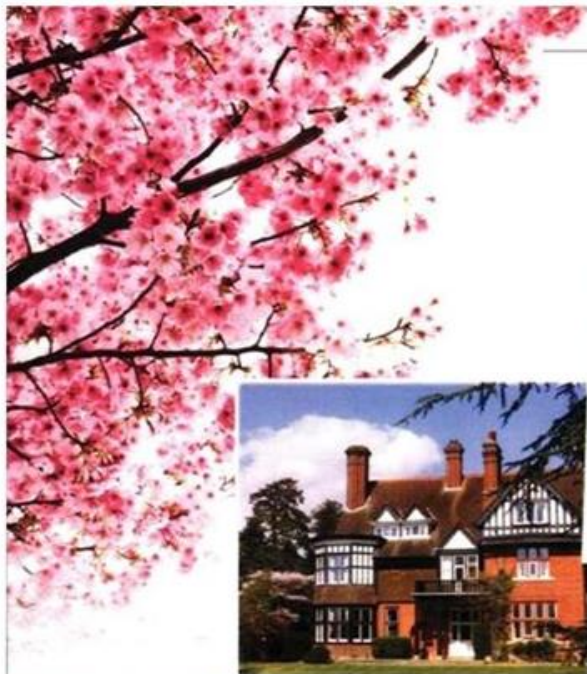
"This cherry is growing in my garden in Kent!" exclaimed Ingram, to which the clearly incredulous expert Funatsu made no reply, simply smiling and bowing deeply.

Ingram was very willing to give a cutting from this tree and others to the Japanese, but they had to be cut during the tree's winter dormancy. However, the young branches always arrived dead, dried out by the heat as the ship carrying them crossed the Equator, or rotten when he tried embedding them in oriental radishes to keep them moist. Finally, after three winters, he found an ingenious solution, which was to cut potatoes in half and press the bottom end of the branches into the exposed surface. ▷

THE CHERRY TREE IN THE GARDEN OF THE GRANGE IN BENENDEN, KENT, 1925



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'Pink blossoms were painted on the planes of Japanese kamikaze pilots'

This provided just the right amount of water and nutrients for them to survive the trip.

But at the outbreak of the Second World War the relationship between Ingram and his fellow cherry tree enthusiasts and specialists in Japan was abruptly ruptured. Many Japanese plantspeople thought it was unacceptable to receive trees from Ingram, a man of the enemy. Pink blossoms were painted on the fuselage of the planes of Japanese kamikaze pilots. Allied bombing destroyed many trees in urban areas, although ones in rural areas largely survived.

All Ingram, who was in the Kent Home Guard, could do was to retreat into his study and garden to record what he had learned about the flowering cherry. Japan was a tricky subject to discuss, particularly with his daughter-in-law Daphne, who had been held as a prisoner of war by the Japanese.

In 1948 he published *Ornamental Cherries*, even today the standard work on the topic. His garden-enthusiast friends started to call him Cherry, not Collingwood, and his influence over British gardeners increased. Lady Anne Berry, who wanted to create a mini Wisley at her estate Rosemoor in North Devon, consulted Ingram. Rosemoor is now administered by the Royal Horticultural Society and is open to the public today.

The wiry and strong Cherry lived until he was 100 and continued to go on plant-hunting expeditions over Europe into old age, until restrictions on plant exports were introduced. He had always travelled in Europe looking for a variety of Mediterranean species. He particularly collected the shrub *Cistus*.

'Cherry influenced my life more than any other individual,' Lady Anne told Ingram's biographer, Naoko Abe. 'He literally opened my eyes to the wonders of nature and to plants in particular.' ■

• 'Cherry' Ingram: *The Englishman Who Saved Japan's Blossoms* by Naoko Abe is published by Chatto and Windus (£16.99). *Ornamental Cherries*, written and illustrated by C. Ingram, is out of print.

• RHS Garden Rosemoor, Torrington, Devon: 01805 624067; www.rhs.org.uk/gardens/rosemoor



Top left: Koganei Avenue in Tokyo, 1926, photographed by Ingram. Top right: The Grange, 2015. Now an assisted-living home, 40 Matsumae cherry trees were planted to mark the millennium. Above: Funatsu, photographed by Ingram in 1926. Right: Fugenzo at Nikko. Below: 'Reconciliation cherries' - Matsumae varieties in a nursery at Great Windsor Park



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