

by Elaina Loveland

Ephemeral Beauty



SAKURA, OR CHERRY BLOSSOMS, are an iconic image to the Japanese—they embody *mono no aware*, which means “an empathy toward things” and describes the transience of physical objects and the feeling of melancholy at their passing. Cherry blossoms, with their brief flash of beauty and quick death, have been a metaphor for mortality in Japanese culture.

In the early twentieth century, one woman’s vision to bring cherry blossoms to the United States helped transform the capital of the nation and beautify a park in New York City. Eliza Ruhamah Scidmore came back from Japan in 1885 with an idea to bring cherry blossoms to this country. Her idea did not bear fruit until she wrote a letter to First Lady Helen Taft in 1909, who ultimately pushed the idea forward. In 1910 a gift from Japan of 2,000 trees was given to the United States; two years later, another gift of 3,020 cherry blossoms were given to replace the earlier crop that had to be destroyed due to disease. The trees were planted in Sakura Park in Manhattan and at the shore of the Tidal Basin in Washington, D.C.

Every year in Washington, where NAFSA’s national office is, we look forward to cherry blossom season in early spring. It falls in March or April depending on the year, and each spring, local residents and tourists alike flock to the Tidal Basin to enjoy the beauty of these delicate flowering trees.

Last March, just as cherry blossoms were beginning to bud here and to flower in much of Japan, disaster struck that nation with a catastrophic earthquake and tsunami. Now, one year later, the disaster has faded, but is not forgotten, and the cherry blossoms are beginning to bud yet again. They remind of us of the preciousness and brevity of life, of those whose lives were cut short, just like the trees themselves that have only brief moments of glory followed by a quick demise.

This issue’s cover story, “Overcoming Chaos,” details how last year’s earthquake and tsunami affected Japan’s higher education system and how universities abroad dealt with the crisis and assisted those studying in the country while it happened.

Also in this Issue

This issue includes a feature story on U.S. students pursuing academic degrees abroad instead of staying at home. Also, our popular annual intensive language supplement, which includes articles on foreign language learning in MBA programs and ESL programs at community colleges, is enclosed.

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