



England's blessings, via Japan

*Photographed at the
Royal Botanic Gardens,
Kew, Surrey*

Mark Griffiths revels
in the beauty and cultural
and emotional effects
of Japanese
cherry-blossom time

Photographs by Marianne Majerus



JAPANESE cherries first graced the Royal Botanic Gardens, at Kew in Surrey, in the 19th century, but it wasn't until 1909 that they became a major attraction. That year, the Cherry Walk, devoted to Japanese *Prunus* cultivars, was installed between the Palm House and King William's Temple. In 1935, an extension was added, a formal avenue running to the Temperate House. The trees grew in glory until the Great Storm of 1987. A student at Kew at the time, I've sharp memories of their upended roots and dismembered boughs.

It was feared that another devastating storm, in January 1990, would be the end of the walk, but this feature was too well-loved to lose. Restoration work began in 1993, sponsored, aptly, by the Sakura Bank of Japan—*Sakura* is Japanese for cherry.

One April morning, a decade later, I visited Kew with a guest from Japan, one of the great masters of his country's traditional horticulture. He was delighted that many of the cherries had been grafted onto their rootstocks close to the ground, allowing them to develop a natural-seeming habit—low-branching and loose, billowing and lyrical. 'When I began coming to Britain,' he

explained, 'I'd see lots of our cherries grafted as tall, straight-stemmed standards. They looked terrible, like giant's lollipops.'

As if to illustrate his point, we'd paused beside *Prunus* Kanzan. Commonly top-worked as a screamingly unplaceable standard in the UK, this candy-pink, frilly-flowered cultivar was the reason why many gardening cognoscenti became snuffy about *Sakura*. Kew's specimens, however, were more bowed and gnarled, in one case, multi-stemmed and sprawling. Grown this way, I thought, Kanzan could almost be desirable.

I had no such hesitation about *Prunus* Matsumae-beni-tamanishiki, a breath-takingly lovely tree—again, low-crowned, its boughs heavy with flowers like miniature damask roses,

Above: As softly coloured as an Impressionist painting, *Prunus* Matsumae-Shizuka above a carpet of snowdrops. Preceding pages: Breathtakingly lovely: *Prunus* Matsumae-beni-tamanishiki; hailing from Matsumae, in the far north of Japan, the rest of its name means 'small crimson brocade'

in cool contrast to the burnished new foliage. The first part of its name refers to Matsumae, the far northern town where it was bred and introduced in 1963. The remainder means 'small crimson brocade'.

Many *Sakura* names, I'd learn that day, are poetry in concentrate—for example, that of my favourite cultivar among Kew's collection, a small, unsophisticated-looking tree with widely spreading branches decked with single white, honey-scented blooms amid russet unfolding leaves. Its name is *Prunus* Taki-nioi or 'perfume waterfall'.

As we left, I remarked that we'd been lucky with the glorious weather. 'On the contrary,' my guest replied, 'we've encountered a problem all too familiar in my country, where spring

is usually warm and sunny. Ideally, we'd have had *hana-gumori*.' Literally 'flowers in cloudy weather', *hana-gumori*, he explained, is the proper way of viewing cherry blossom. For true appreciation, they need a backdrop of overcast grey—the kind of sky,' he concluded with a smile, 'that I've always thought one of the blessings of being in England.'

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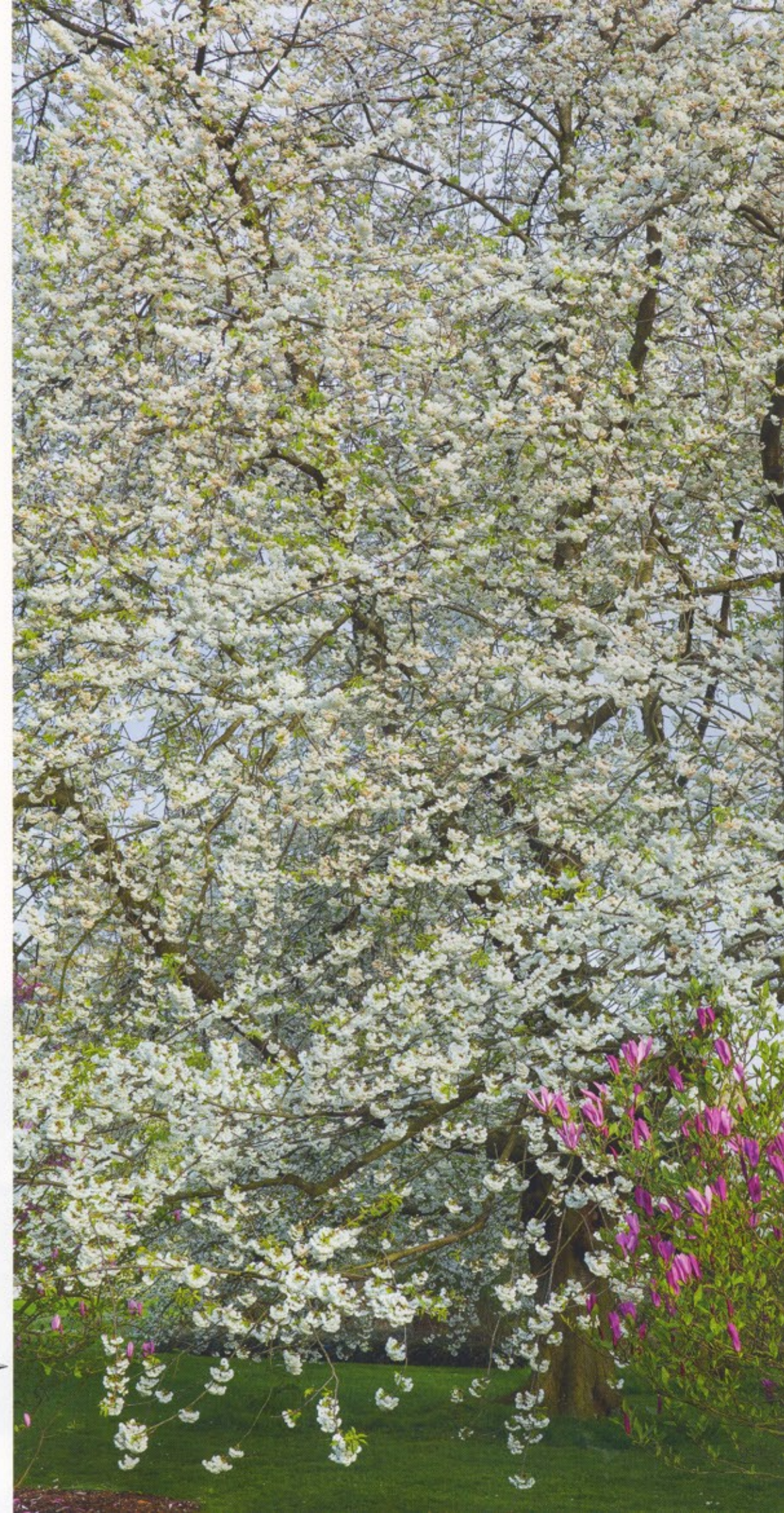
Japan's cherry love is primarily about spring jubilation, but it also inspires more reflective emotions. *Sakura* epitomises *mono no aware*, literally 'the pathos of things' and meaning the poignancy of ephemeral beauty or glory—an important concept for a nation familiar with disaster. Let your joy in these flowers be all the more intense for the knowledge that their loveliness is fleeting.

For well over 1,000 years, the bloodlines of Japan's cherries have mingled with a complexity that defies botanical sorting. But there are two species whose demure flowers and delicate tracery of twigs have stolen the hearts of many British gardeners who can't get on with the blousier Japanese cherries. *P. incisa* is a small tree or large shrub, best known to us in the cultivar *Kojo-no-mai* ('a dance in the old castle'), an intricately branching dwarf perfect for containers and spring borders. *Prunus pendula* is more a substantial, but graceful, tree whose slender branches are erect to outspread in var. *ascendens* and cascade spectacularly in cultivars such as *Pendula Rosea*.

These two species hybridised producing *P. x subhirtella*, one form of which astonished Edo gardeners by flowering in autumn and intermittently thereafter until early spring. They called it *Jugatsu-zakura*, 'October cherry', but we know it as *Autumnalis*; there's no better cure for winter blues than the sight of its flowers.

Early in the 18th century, *Prunus pendula* var. *ascendens* found

The double-flowered form of our own great white cherry, *P. avium* Plena



another mate in *P. speciosa* at Somei, a village on the outskirts of Edo. Their offspring were small, decorous trees, some upright to spreading, others weeping, that were remarkable for the profusion of their white or blush, almond-scented blooms. Somei-Yoshino cherries (*P. x yedoensis*) soon turned the village of their birth into a tourist destination. Three centuries later, they're among the world's most popular ornamental *Prunus* cultivars.

As for the other 'village cherries', gathered (by botanists) under the heading Sato-Zakura Group, they became the acme of metropolitan *chic*. In the Edo period (1603–1868), breeding them was one of the principal interests of Japan's horticulturally minded ruling classes.

Hundreds of cultivars were introduced and produced some astonishing treasures—for example, the 'yellow' cherries, a breeding line best represented today by *Prunus* Ukon, whose cream petals, thanks to accents of grass green and madder and the accompanying sepia-tinted new foliage, appear to have the same washed-out yellowish hue as Japanese cloth traditionally dyed with *ukon* or turmeric.

The shogun's government encouraged the cherry cult as a phenomenon of the masses, sponsoring the planting of avenues and temple grounds and requiring the provision of places for *hanami*.

At the end of the Edo period, Algeron Freeman-Mitford (1837–1916, author of *Tales of Old Japan*, 1871) served in Japan as a British diplomat. Having fallen under the *Sakura* spell, he planted many cultivars at his Cotswold country seat (now Batsford Arboretum, holder of the National Collection of Japanese cherries).

The fall of the shogunate boded ill for *Sakura*. It ushered in an era of radical modernisation and industrial development that wasn't going to halt for horticultural heritage. However, British witnesses to these events, such as Freeman-Mitford and, a little later, the artist and garden designer Alfred Parsons, were so impassioned in their defence of Japan's plant culture that the new administration began to regard it as a national asset.

Around this time, *Sakura* found their stoutest foreign champion in the English plantsman Collingwood Ingram (1880–1981). Travelling in Japan, he collected *Prunus* cultivars,



many of which he took home to Benenden in Kent. By the 1930s, 'Cherry' Ingram (as he became known) was fêted in Japan—not least for reintroducing to their native country two famous cultivars that were believed to have fallen extinct: Taihaku, the great white cherry, which he rediscovered in a Sussex garden, and the rich cerise Fukubana, which he spotted in the safekeeping of a Japanese grower in California.

Naturally, when it came to reporting his adventures and discoveries,

Above: Shades of pale: the mutable qualities of *P. Matsu-mae-Shizuka*. Top right: *Prunus* Geraldinae, also known as Asano. Below: Pristine prettiness: *Prunus* Taki-nioi



he chose the pages of this magazine. Indeed, it was *COUNTRY LIFE* that published his *Ornamental Cherries* (1948), the pioneering English work on *Sakura* and now a classic.

To return to my Japanese visitor. On the drive back to Oxford from Kew, he pleaded with us to turn off below Beacon Hill, a promontory of the Chiltern escarpment clothed with ancient flora. Stands of the British native *Prunus avium* glowed brilliant white against grey beech trunks and a sky grown leaden and stormy. The master was silent, staring. 'This must be *hana-gumori*,' I said. 'Exactly,' he replied, 'but it wouldn't matter anyway. These are quite simply the most beautiful cherries I have ever seen. And I'm not just being polite.'  Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, Richmond, Surrey. For details of special spring events, visit www.kew.org or telephone 020-8332 5655

