

# BLOSSOMING RELATIONS



Cherry trees in full bloom near the Washington Monument in Washington, D.C.

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## This year, 2012, marks the centennial of Japan's gift of cherry blossom trees to the United States as a symbol of bilateral friendship.

**E**xactly 100 years ago, Yukio Ozaki, then the mayor of Tokyo City (the predecessor to the current metropolis of Tokyo), presented 3000 cherry blossom saplings to Washington, D.C., as a symbol of friendship between Japan and the United States. The saplings took root on the banks of the Potomac River, where they were planted, and began to blossom every spring in full glory. The beautiful blooms led to the first "cherry blossom festival" in 1927. Over the years, the festival has grown in scale to include a variety of events, including concerts, a parade, and a fireworks display. Today, the National Cherry Blossom Festival is a special spring attraction in Washington, D.C., that brings more than 1 million visitors from around the world to the U.S. capital during its two-week run.

To celebrate the 100-year anniversary of the gift of these saplings, under a special arrangement this year, the National Cherry Blossom Festival was extended for five weeks. During the festival period from March 20 to April 27, a large number of commemorative events took place around Washington, D.C. These include a concert by AKB48, a popular Japanese bubblegum pop group, and a performance by Mansaku Nomura, a *kyogen* (a traditional form of comic theater) artist designated in Japan as "a living national treasure."

First Lady Michelle Obama and Yoriko Fujisaki, the wife of the Japanese ambassador to the United States, and local schoolchildren, plant cherry blossom saplings on March 27.

The Yamakiya Taiko Group, a traditional Japanese drum troupe based in Fukushima, one of the prefectures devastated by the Great East Japan Earthquake and subsequent tsunami, also introduced their music in the parade.

On March 27, First Lady Michelle Obama and Yoriko Fujisaki, the wife of the Japanese ambassador to the United States, planted a new cherry blossom sapling in the Tidal Basin along the Potomac River. It was an historic day that marked the time when First Lady Helen Taft and Iwa Chinda, the wife of the Japanese ambassador to the United States, planted the first of the donated young cherry blossom saplings exactly 100 years earlier. On that occasion the First Lady said the following in a speech she delivered to people in attendance:

"For so many years, these trees have served as a symbol of the great friendship between the United States and Japan, and as a reminder of our shared hopes, dreams and aspirations." 

