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11th fl. Jiji Press Bldg.

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Fax: 03-5565-4828

E-mail: subscribe@jef.or.jp

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Spring is sakura season in Japan

Sakura, or cherry blossoms, tells us that spring has come. There are many species of cherry trees in Japan. *Somei-yoshino* is a most-popular cherry tree. It is planted in schools, parks, on riverside paths, and streets all over the nation. The cherry blossom season, normally from late March to early April, also marks the start of a new business and school year. Many Japanese have fond memory of their school graduation day or school entrance day with *somei-yoshino's* lovely pale-pink blooms.

It is said that *sakura* and Japanese have had a deep relationship since ancient days. Back in medieval times, cherry trees had been treated as the abode of the god for a bumper harvest because cherry flowers bloom during the time of seeding. When it bloomed, villagers would hold a festival under a cherry tree to pray for a good harvest. Although most people now must have forgotten about the meaning of the ritual, we keep its essence and hold *hanami*, or flower viewing, parties.

In today's *hanami*, many families and groups of friends get together and party under blossoming cherry trees. They eat, they drink, they talk, and some people even sing or dance in open-air *hanami* parks filled with crowds. This really is flower power. When it gets dark, the view becomes like a fantasy when the pale-pink cherry flowers are illuminated in the dark.

Recently, there are concerns about the fate of *somei-yoshino*. Global warming makes *somei-yoshino* bloom earlier than usual, and this may be adversely affecting its life span, about 60 to 80 years. We must act if we want to keep the beauty of cherry blossoms intact.

Japan, for now, still has plenty of *sakura*. Go *hanami*. It is a lot of fun watching people enjoying themselves at a *hanami* party, and it is even a good idea to join them. JS



A view at Jindaiji temple, Tokyo, in the middle of April