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 Editor Barbara Gunn 604.605.2179
 homes@vancouversun.com

Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival gets underway with illuminated exhibit



Steve Whysall
 Gardening Expert

In Japan, the breathtaking but short-lived beauty of cherry blossoms has for centuries been appreciated as poignantly symbolizing the transient and ephemeral here-today-gone-tomorrow nature of life itself.

When the Japanese sit and picnic and drink sake under the cloud-like canopy of cherry trees, they are also being encouraged to make a conscious effort to be more sensitive and mindful of the impermanence of things and acknowledge the reality that ultimately all things must pass.

At this year's Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival, which gets underway on April 4, this sensitivity to the ephemeral — what the Japanese call "mono no aware" — will be emphasized in a new and exciting way through stylish installations by light artist Stuart Ward.

Using LED and patterned video lights to illuminate cherry blossoms in about 10 locations, Ward hopes to stop passersby in their tracks and get them to appreciate the temporary and fragile beauty of the delicate pink and white flowers.

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A blooming celebration



IAN SMITH/THE VANCOUVER SUN

The Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival was the brainchild of Linda Poole in 2006 (above). Light artist Stuart Ward under the cherry blossoms at dusk with images he will be projecting on to the blooms during the festival (left). Dancers with pink pop-art umbrellas will perform during the festival (below).



GERRY KAHRMANN/PNG
 PHOTO BELOW BY AZIZ DHAMANI



IN THE GARDEN

City blooms set to shine

Continued from B5

"The lights will go on and people will see something happening. Then they have a choice: to stop and check it out or to rush on by.

"The light show will be a reminder that if you don't stop, if you don't pull over to see what is happening, you'll miss it because it won't be there tomorrow."

Ward plans to switch on the lights just for a few hours in the evening, from dusk around 7:30 p.m. to about 11 p.m.

He wants the installations to be a surprise and to add an element of spontaneity to the cherry blossom festival.

"I like the idea of freeing art from its normal boundaries and letting it run wild to engage a wider audience and capture people's attention when they least expect it," he says.

The exact locations of the light installations will be announced each day on the cherry blossom festival website at vcfb.ca and via Twitter.

"The main idea is to make the point that life is brief and beauty does not last and life can pass you by if you don't seize the moment," says Ward, who developed his skills as a light-artist while living in Japan for five years.

The festival is calling the installations the Sakura Illumination Tour and is promoting it as a "unique experience" and "an intangible memory of a time and place never to be duplicated."

Festival organizers also like the fact that in a world where high-speed technology tends to propel people faster and faster into a blur of activity, the illuminated cherry blossoms will be using technology to get people to slow down and pause for a moment to "embrace nature's ephemeral beauty."

The festival will also be using a flash-mob-style dance event to get its message across.

About 13,500 dancers with bright cherry-blossom pink pop-art umbrellas will perform the World Umbrella Dance on the plaza in front of the Vancouver Art Gallery at Georgia and Howe at 12:45 p.m. on April 13.



GERRY KAHRMANN/PNG

Light artist Stuart Ward under the cherry blossoms at dusk with images he will be projecting onto the blooms during the Cherry Blossom festival.

The dance, choreographed by Bollywood star Shiamak Davar, is designed to express the joy of spring and the beautiful way the city gets tickled pink in April and May as thousands of ornamental Japanese cherry trees burst into bloom. The music will be Davar's new record, *Shabop*, meaning to dance without worry and celebrate life.

The true stars of the festival, however, will be the blossoms themselves.

Since it was started by Linda Poole in 2006, the festival, which runs to April 30, has expanded and added a variety of creative components.

This year, there will be cherry blossom walks and talks by experts as well as bicycle tours (Bike the Blossoms) through key neighbourhoods.

The festival's website now also features an interactive map showing precisely where cherry trees are in bloom

throughout the city.

And in addition to an international haiku poetry competition open to submissions from all over the world, the festival has arranged plein-air painting sessions for budding artists keen to learn how to capture the beauty of cherry blossoms on canvas.

The festival will kick off on April 4 at 11:30 a.m. with its Cherry Jam at Burrard Street SkyTrain station.

Organizers are making it possible for people to have a picnic lunch (ordered in advance through the website) in a traditional Japanese bento box while being entertained by taiko drumming, dance and other music.

But the key event of the festival will be the two-day Sakura Days Japan Fair on April 6 and 7 at VanDusen Botanical Garden at the corner of 37th and Oak Street.

This will be a celebration of Japanese cultural arts, traditions and performances, including an authentic Japanese tea ceremony, sake tastings, ikebana (flower arranging) demonstrations, haiku readings and various music and dance events.

For complete details on all these activities, including dates and times for walks, talks, painting sessions and bike tours and more, go to the festival website at vcfb.ca

swhsall@vancouver.sun.com

Follow me on Twitter, twitter.com/stevewhysall

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Steve Whysall talks with perennial king John Schroeder at vancouver.sun.com/podcasts

Here comes the great pink wave

Steve Whysall
Gardening Expert

It can be hit and miss with cherry blossoms in Vancouver.

Some years, such as 2010 when the city hosted the Winter Olympics, the weather in February was fantastic and the cherry blossoms never looked better.

Other years, it rains continuously and washes everything out and all we're left with are sad puddles of pink on sidewalks.

Nevertheless, there is always some moment, usually a warm, sunny spell in April or May, when we are forced to stop and wonder if there are any species other than pink flowering Japanese cherry trees planted on city streets.

In reality, ornamental cherry trees represent only a fraction of the total number of Vancouver's street trees — about 17,000 of the total of 140,000 at last count.

There are more maples planted: about 33,590, representing 24 per cent of the total stock. But maples don't quite pack the same visual punch as the giant wave of pink that sweeps from one side of the city to the other, moving west to east, from March to May.



The pink cherry blossoms wave starts on the west side of the city in late February in Point Grey.

What compounds the impression that Vancouver is blossom heaven is that thousands of flowering plum trees (at least 13,000) have also been planted and usually flower around the same time.

Vancouver's love affair with cherry blossoms dates back to the 1930s, when the Japanese cities of Kobe and Yokohama gave the park board 500 trees to plant at the Japanese cenotaph in Stanley Park to honour Japanese Canadians who served in the First World War. In 1958, another 300 trees were donated by the Japanese consul.

From that moment on, the popularity of ornamental cherry trees soared and the park board began planting more and more, partly in response to the fact that many large shade trees, such as elms and chestnuts, were causing problems with their roots getting into drains and sewer lines and their

canopies touching utility lines.

In fact, some would argue the park board got a little carried away and ended up going overboard and planted too many cherry trees.

As a species, they are OK for a time, notably when they are at their peak flowering in spring, but they aren't very attractive the rest of the year and some cultivars are short-lived and prone to disease.

Over the past year, the park board has removed 272 cherry trees from streets ... but it has also planted 341 new ones.

The pink cherry blossoms wave starts on the west side of the city in Point Grey in late February with

early blooming 'Autumnalis' and 'Whitcomb' varieties.

It slowly sweeps east as the umbrella-shaped 'Accolades' variety start producing intense pink blossoms.

This wash of pink reaches its peak from the end of March to the middle of April when all the 'Akebono' and Yoshino cherries are at their most glorious.

The sequence continues through April and into May with the blooming of thousands of 'Kanzan' cherries, as well as various more specialty cultivars such as 'Shirotae', 'Shogetsu' and 'Shirofugen'.

'Kanzan' (a.k.a. 'Kwanzan') is by far the most widely planted cultivar, although it is prone to cankers, aphids and fungal disease such as brown rot.

Today, the Yoshino cherry, *Prunus yedoensis* 'Akebono', is considered the best all-around performer.

Ornamental Cherries in Vancouver by Douglas Justice is an excellent guide to all the 35 different kinds of cherry trees in the city.

It is available at the UBC Shop in the Garden or VanDusen Garden Shop or online from the festival website for \$20 (plus tax and shipping).

swhsall@vancouver.sun.com

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AT A GLANCE

Your quick guide to the Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival, which runs from April 4 to April 30:

April 4:

Cherry Jam opening ceremony at 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. on April 4 at Burrard SkyTrain station on Burrard Street, Vancouver. Culinary demonstrations by Tojo Zen Japanese Restaurant from 11 a.m. to noon; concert from noon to 1:30 p.m. Bento lunch boxes can be ordered in advance from the festival website; 50 boxes will be available on a first-come first-served basis from 11 a.m.

April 6 — 7:

Sakura Days Japan Fair from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. at VanDusen Botanical Garden, 37th and Oak Street, Vancouver. A celebration of Japanese cultural arts, traditions and performances. Admission: \$12 (\$9 for seniors and youth, \$6.50 for kids 3 to 12), \$25 (family rate); 2 adults, 2 children under 19).

April 11:

Doug Justice, associate director and curator of collections at UBC Botanical Gardens will also be giving a cherry tree talk from 7:30 to 9 p.m. at the new Visitor's Centre at VanDusen Botanical Garden.

April 13:

World Umbrella Dance at 12:45 p.m., led by Shiamak Davar Dance Company on the plaza at Vancouver Art Gallery, Georgia and Howe Street. There will be several performances with a specific number of participants in each "wave." There is still time to take part in this event. See VCBF website for details.

Walks and talks. Various cherry blossom walks are planned throughout the festival.

Throughout the festival:

Bike the blossoms:

Fun, free guided bike rides of key blooms are being organized by Velopalooza. The rides will include a talk by Vancouver park board arborist, Bill Stephen.

Sakura Illumination Tour:

Light artist Stuart Ward, of Hfour Design, will be lighting up cherry trees in various areas of the city. Check the festival website for location and illumination times.

Plein-air painting sessions.

Every Saturday from April 6 to 27 from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. at VanDusen Botanical Garden. Bring your easel, paints and supplies as a team of exceptional artists guide you as you create your own masterpiece. There is a fee. Check out the festival website for details.

For more information about all these activities plus times and entry fees, go to the festival website at vcfb.ca