

Shinjuku Gyoen is one of Tokyo's premier *hanami* cherry blossom viewing spots. The park contains approximately one thousand cherry trees of about sixty-five different varieties. Since the time of the blooming of each of the varieties differs, the cherry blossom viewing season at Shinjuku Gyoen is comparatively long. The best viewing season starts from the end of March to early April with Somei Yoshino, the most popular variety of cherry in Tokyo. Then, from the beginning to middle of April, Ichiyo, Kanzan, and other varieties of double-blossom cherries take over.

The cherry blossom has played an important and integral role in Japanese culture since ancient times, appearing in the *Manyoshu* anthology of poetry collected in the eighth century, and the *Kojiki* (Records of Ancient Matters) from the same period, and becoming ever more prominent during the Heian period (794-1185). During the nineteenth century, a boom in new horticultural techniques produced hundreds of ornamental varieties. The Somei Yoshino, by far the most popular variety today, is thought to have been developed during this period.

Japan is famous for its cherry blossoms, and Shinjuku Gyoen has a long history of cherry blossom viewing because of its diverse collection of cherry trees. The first imperial cherry blossom viewing was held here in 1917, and since 1952, the prime minister has hosted dignitaries from around the world at the annual Cherry Blossom Viewing Party.

Cherry Blossom Calendar and Main Varieties of Cherries in Shinjuku Gyoen

Somei Yoshino (*Cerasus* × *yedoensis*; Matsumura “Yedoensis”)

Peak: Late March to Early April

This hugely popular variety was first cultivated in the mid-nineteenth century as a hybrid of two other species of cherry trees. The variety was developed in Somei Village in the northern part of Tokyo, and was originally known as Yoshino Zakura (Yoshino Cherry). Because it grows quickly and produces gorgeous blossoms, the Somei Yoshino has been planted widely since the beginning of the twentieth century, and is now the most common cherry tree in Japan. It is also popular overseas, and is the variety most closely identified with cherry blossoms in Japan.

The flowers open before the leaves appear, with the whole tree bursting into bloom at the same time. The flowers last for just a few days, before falling en masse, creating a beautiful carpet of pink petals.

There are approximately four hundred Somei Yoshino trees in the park.

Ichiyō (*Cerasus lannesiana*; “Ichiyō” Koidzumi)

Peak: Early to Mid-April

This is one of the best-known double-blossom cherries, said to have been first cultivated during the Kamakura era (1185–1333). It is the main double-blossom variety in the garden, with approximately one hundred thirty trees.

Kanzan (*Cerasus lannesiana*; “Sekiyama” Koidzumi)

Peak: Mid-April

Kanzan is another beautiful and very popular double-blossom cherry. It is more flamboyant species with blossoms that are larger and a deeper crimson than the Ichiyō. There are about ninety Kanzan trees in the park.