

Weeping Cherry Trees at Jotokuji Temple

The twin weeping cherry trees that tower over the cemetery at Jotokuji Temple are between 250 and 300 years old, and their blooming in late April traditionally served as the signal to local farmers that it was time to prepare for the growing season. The flowers usually coincide with the April 25 commemoration of the death of Rennyo (1415–1499), a major figure in the Jodo Shinshu (True Pure Land) school of Buddhism that was deeply influential in Shirakawa-go. On that day, local devotees would traditionally memorialize Rennyo by gathering underneath the cherry blossoms at Jotokuji.

Cherry trees are a common sight at cemeteries throughout Japan. There are many explanations for this, but an often-cited one is that the trees' short bloom is thought to symbolize the fleeting nature of human life. The folklorist Yanagita Kunio (1875–1962) suggested that the association between cherry blossoms and death reaches back into antiquity, when the dead were laid to rest beneath cherry trees. The belief was that their souls might return to the realm of the living, albeit briefly, in the form of the otherworldly beautiful blossoms of spring.