

## A Historical Walk Around Kyoto

Photo by Ryotaro Nakajima



### Cherry Blossoms in Ninnaji Temple

Ninnaji Temple was founded by Emperor Uda (867–931) in 888. Descendants of the Imperial family took over his position as a resident priest of the temple for around 1000 years. This temple is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site, because there are many national treasures in this temple, and also important cultural properties such as a five-storied pagoda.

Cherry trees here grow to only about two meters in height. You can sit on a picnic bench for a close-up look at the cherry blossoms. Cherry trees go bad easily if a branch is broken off the trees or shaken by visitors, so in order to keep the view beautiful, please exercise good manners.

### Why Do Japanese People Drink Under Cherry Trees?

In times long past, ancient Japanese people used to predict how many rice plants they would harvest in autumn depending on the amount of cherry blossoms on the mountains in spring. Cherry trees have been part of a way of life since then. There is a reason why modern Japanese people enjoy drinking under cherry trees in cherry-blossom season. Ancient Japanese people gave offerings including sake to the god of rice plants under cherry trees in order to receive a favorable harvest in return. However, the offerings were always later consumed by them.

### Why Are Cherry Trees Often Planted in Historical Gardens?

Japan has no official national flower. However, most Japanese people think of the cherry blossom as a symbol of Japan. The cherry blossom was also the symbol for samurai spirit.

Many things including plum blossoms were imported from China and became fashionable in the Nara period (710–793). The plum blossom was more popular than the cherry blossom for rich people. However, trade between Japan and China stopped in 894 due to the political instability of China, and cherry blossoms became very popular again. Modern Japanese people enjoy having a *Hanami* party under cherry trees. The origin of this custom can be traced back to the beginning of the 9th century. Emperor Saga (786–842) planted cherry trees in his garden and had a party while viewing cherry blossoms. Since the Edo period (1600–1868), *Hanami* parties have become more and more popular with ordinary people.

By *Etsuko.M*