

(Top) Akebono Yoshino (*Prunus × yedoensis* 'Akebono')

(Bottom) *Prunus serrulata* 'Kwanzan'

PHOTO COURTESY OF J. FRANK SCHMIDT & SON CO.

Past, present, and future

Flowering cherry trees remain popular, from old mainstays to new selections, with more on the way

BY TRACY ILENE MILLER

IT'S MARCH, AND SOON showy displays of Japanese flowering cherry trees will trumpet their annual announcement that spring has arrived. Thus, consumers will be prompted to head to garden centers with hopes of adding the ephemeral beauty of these dramatically blooming trees to their own yards.

Once they do, there is a good chance that shoppers will encounter an Oregon-grown tree: Nearly one-fifth of all flowering cherry trees in the United States originate from Oregon.

Oregon is the nation's top grower of flowering trees overall, logging more than \$51 million in sales in 2019. Although sales in Oregon of flowering cherry are down by an estimated \$1.9 million from five years ago, at \$6.3 million, they are still a high-value plant.

The market has shifted away from urban street-side plantings, but regular use of flowering cherry in residential settings combined with sustained research into new cultivars that offer smaller footprints and growing improvements portend a bright future for this still in-demand tree.

New introductions vs. old favorites

Several introductions of flowering cherry trees in the past 15 years have become the better-performing challengers of older varieties. Nonetheless, two cultivars dating back to at least the 1800s, *Prunus serrulata* 'Kwanzan' and *P. serrulata* 'Mount Fuji', have been continuous top sellers for decades.

'Kwanzan' (25–30 feet tall by 25–30 feet wide, Zones 4a–8b) by far remains the most popular of flowering cherries nationwide. The hardiest of the double-flowering types, it bears deep pink blooms that hang in clusters. Its new leaves emerge bronze and then turn green in summer and orange-yellow in autumn.

'Mount Fuji' (15–20 feet tall by 20–25 feet wide, Zones 5–7) opens earlier in spring than 'Kwanzan', with slightly pink-tinged buds that turn into white, mildly fragrant and semi-double flowers that hang in pendulous clusters. Leaves on the flat-topped, horizontally branching tree emerge bronze, turn green in summer and then orange-red in fall.

Stephanie Mack, a yard buyer at **Portland Nursery** (Portland, Oregon) since 2003, believes sales of flowering cherry trees generally have gotten stronger in the last five years. "It has been one area of my department that has grown," she said. Those sales are helped each year by the pageantry of the spring season.

"A tree's bloom time is its main sales time," Mack said. Customers notice and seek those same plants out.

That includes the Portland, Oregon-based Hoyt Arboretum display of *P. serrulata* 'Shirofugen' (25–30 feet tall by 25–30 feet wide, Zone 5--8). It has pink buds that open to fragrant, large white pink-tinged double blooms, that hang on long pedicels in clusters. They then age to a deeper pink. Dating back to at least the 15th century and introduced to the West in the 19th cen-



Past, present and future

(Top) Pink Flair® Cherry (*Prunus sargentii* 'JFSKW58')

(Bottom) Pink Cascade® (P. 'NCPH1')

PHOTO COURTESY OF J. FRANK SCHMIDT & SON CO.

tury, 'Shirofugen' has blooms that open in late spring. The leaves on the vase-shaped, flat-topped tree emerge crimson-bronze, and then turn green in summer and bronze-red in fall.

"It gets taller than 'Mount Fuji' and is broader, and has more disease resistance," Kevin Beat of **Eugene Wholesale Nursery** (Eugene, Oregon) said. "I think it is spectacular, and not used as much as it should be, but it can be overpowering for some yards because of its width."

The springtime show of Akebono Yoshino (*Prunus × yedoensis* 'Akebono'), 25 feet tall 25 feet wide, Zones 4–8) also prompts garden center requests. "We have those growing on the Tom McCall Waterfront Park in Portland," Mack said. "When those are in bloom, then people want that tree."

'Akebono' was introduced in 1925 by the W.B. Clarke Nursery (San Jose, California) as a selection of Yoshino (*Prunus × yedoensis*), which is the most represented variety, at 70%, on the Tidal Basin in Washington D.C., seat of the original U.S. Cherry Blossom Festival in 1935. ('Kanzan' follows a distant second, at 13%.) Cherry festivals and flowering cherry tree-focused interpretative displays have expanded since to all parts of the nation, from Portland's few hundred trees to Macon, Georgia's annual celebration of the more than 300,000 'Yoshino' trees that bloom around the city in late March.

Because of that name recognition, 'Yoshino' is still a high-demand tree, even as stronger cultivars are introduced. 'Yoshino' has sentimental, historical and horticultural significance, given its presence for more than 100 years in DC; the trees' origins as a 1912 gift from Japan; and their later contribution to restoring the 'Yoshino' lineage to Tokyo, Japan, after World War II destruction there.

Typically, flowering cherry trees last between 25 and 50 years. To preserve the history of the germplasm of the capital's 'Yoshino', the J. Frank Schmidt Charitable Foundation funded propagation replac-

ments of the original trees, which included DNA fingerprinting by Margaret R. Pooler, geneticist at the National Arboretum. The foundation, established by wholesale grower **J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co.**, (JFS) in Boring, Oregon, supports horticultural research and education nationwide.

'Akebono' is more disease resistant than its parent.

One of the drawbacks of flowering cherry in the Pacific Northwest is their susceptibility to brown rot (*Monilinia* spp.), according to Beat. It thrives in warmer, rainy winter weather, and can lead to blighting of the blossoms and cankers on the woody tissue.

"When they get that, the petals turn brown and it kills the tip of the branch," Beat said.

New growth can help hide the rot, typically after the bloom.

Its appearance can be unsightly if the blossoms do not drop and leaves on the infected twigs turn brown, wither and remain attached.

Mechanical and chemical controls can be used to counter these effects.

Breeding for the future

Current breeding efforts are focusing on improvements. Meacham believes there is room for help, especially considering the age of many of the cultivars and the high percentage of flowering cherry nursery stock grown in the Pacific Northwest.

"We don't sell the bulk of our cherries in the Northwest, but we have to grow them here," Meacham said.

With the fairly warm and wet



'Akebono' is very similar to its parent 'Yoshino' (single flower with five petals), with a rounded, more moderate stature that spreads with age and supports masses of fragrant soft pink, semi-double blooms that Beat describes as cotton candy on a stick. Dark green leaves turn yellow with orange highlights in fall.

"The flower is pinker than 'Yoshino', and it does a little better in the Pacific Northwest," said Guy Meacham of JFS.

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early springs, the Pacific Northwest can be a tough place for flowering cherry. Introducing varieties with disease resistance can help the market and growers. 'Akebono' is one of the newer introductions that has earned distinction as a disease-resistant tree, which prompted its Great Plant Pick designation in 2003.

As well, introduced by JFS in 2004, Pink Flair[®] Cherry (*P. sargentii* 'JFSKW58', 25 feet tall by 15 feet wide, Zones 3b-8) is disease resistant with an added bonus of exceptional cold hardiness, down to Zone 3b, as opposed to Zone 4 for other *P. sargentii* and Zone 5 for other flowering cherry varieties.

A narrow, upright grower, Pink Flair is a later bloomer, avoiding frost damage of the bright pink single flowers and deep green foliage that turns orange-red in fall. Although no flowering cherry are on the approved street tree list in Portland, at least eight are on the approved list of private property replacement trees under the Title 11 city code, including Pink Flair.

Upright trees are trending higher in the market over weeping varieties, especially with landscapers. JFS dropped *P. 'Amanogawa'* (*P. serrulata* 'Amanogawa', 20 feet tall by 5-6 feet wide, Zones 5-8) in 2019.

"It was my biggest seller last year to landscapers," Beat said. "A lot of them went to California."

Landscapers have a renewed interest in 'Amanogawa' for its narrow footprint that fits shrinking lot sizes, he said. Clusters of soft pink double flowers dot the upright tree in early spring. The foliage emerges bronze-green, and turns green in summer and then bright orange-red in fall.

For its size, Beat thinks *P. serrulata* 'Shogetsu' is underused. Translating to "moon hanging low by a pine tree," 'Shogetsu' (15-18 feet tall by 15-20 feet wide, Zones 5-8) is a tree of smaller stature with a rounded shape and a slightly flat top. Beat believes it fits today's yards better than other trees. With light pink buds that turn into completely white double flowers, it blooms so profusely, it almost resembles a weeping cherry. >>

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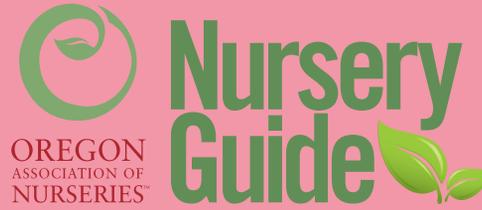
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There is no shortage of flowering cherry tree selections on the market. The OAN's Nursery Guide book and website is the resource that can help you find and obtain them quickly.



Simply log on to www.NurseryGuide.com and enter part or all of the plant's common or botanical name. You can make your search as wide (say, all of *Prunus*) or narrow (say, *Prunus yeodensis* 'Akebono') as you like. Enter your search, find out who is selling it, then call or email to connect with the grower. It's that simple!

All of the selections mentioned in this article are listed on the site, and you'll find others if you search:

Prunus serrulata 'Kwanzan'	25 listings
Prunus yeodensis 'Akebono'	19 listings
Prunus yeodensis (Yoshino Cherry)	16 listings
Prunus serrulata 'Mt. Fuji'	10 listings
Prunus serrulata 'Royal Burgundy'	8 listings
Prunus serrulata 'Amanogawa'	7 listings
Prunus 'Okame'	7 listings
Prunus 'Accolade'	6 listings
Prunus 'Shirofugen'	5 listings
Prunus sargentii 'JFSKW58' Pink Flair Cherry	4 listings
Prunus subhirtella 'Autumnalis'	3 listings
Prunus 'JFSZKW14' First Blush Cherry	1 listing
Prunus 'NCPH1' Pink Cascade	1 listing
Prunus sargentii 'KW21PS'	1 listing
Prunus serrulata	1 listing
Prunus serrulata 'Shogetsu'	1 listing

Reaching out to your market

If you grow any of these flowering cherries, or others, you can add your company to the listings and start getting calls. Just log on to www.NurseryGuide.com to get started. You must be an OAN member.

Help us build our database

If you grow any flowering cherry and they are not listed on Nursery Guide, no worries — we would appreciate knowing about it. Just let us know, and we will add it to our database. Contact us at nurseryguide@oan.org to get started. Our site lists the cultural information, description, photos, hardiness zone, mature height and width, and much more.

To meet the continued interest in narrower forms, JFS introduced in 2020 Pink Myst® (*P. sargentii* 'JFS KW21PS' PP 32619, 30 feet tall by 15 feet wide, Zones 4–8), a seedling of 'Pink Flair' selected for its upright, narrower stature. It has stand-out dark pink flowers and dark green foliage that turns orange and red in fall.

Even as new cultivars of *P. sargentii* are introduced, seedlings are still in demand and being produced — in places where a large 30 foot by 30 foot tree can fit — for their disease resistance, hardiness, adaptability and generally good fall color of reds and oranges. Size is usually the top consideration for buyers, Mack said, and then other features are flower color, flower volume, bloom time and four-season interest.

Autumn Flowering Cherry (*P. subhirtella* 'Autumnalis Rosea', 25 feet tall by 22 wide, Zones 5–8) earns the "early bloom" award, flowering as it does in November, then again in spring and often intermittently in regions with milder winters. It's an upright spreader with slender erect branches and whip-like twigs showcasing dark pink buds that open darker and fade to paler pink semi-double to double blooms.

And for its wintertime silhouette, customers choose birchbark cherry (*P. serrula*, 20 feet high by 20 feet wide, Zones 5a–9b) more for its exfoliating coppery red-brown bark than the nodding white blooms, which are sparse. It's not a big seller, but it's still of interest as a focal point for the shiny exposed bark, its upright, rounded habit and the added interest of cherry-red drupes that follow blooming.

At JFS, after 'Kanzan', Meacham said the nursery's top sellers are:

- First Blush® (*P.* 'JFS-KW14' P.A.F., 25 feet tall by 12 feet wide, Zones 5–8)
- Pink Cascade® (*P.* 'NCPH1' PP 27579, 12 feet tall by 12 feet wide, Zones 5–8)
- 'Yoshino'

Those three are followed by Royal Burgundy (*P. serrulata* 'Royal Burgundy', 20 feet tall by 15 feet wide, Zones 5–8), a slightly slower growing, smaller sport of 'Kanzan' discovered by Frank

(Top) First Blush® (Prunus 'JFS-KW14')

(Bottom) Pink Myst® (P. sargentii 'JFS-KW21PS')

PHOTO COURTESY OF J. FRANK SCHMIDT & SONS CO.



Parks of Speer & Sons Nursery in Woodburn, Oregon, and released commercially in 1990. With darkish pink double flowers and purple leaves that turn red in fall, 'Royal Burgundy' offers a nice replacement for flowering plum. Mack considers it an impressive bloomer without the prospect of fruit drop.

'First Blush', introduced in 2015, was selected from Keith Warren's breeding work at JFS of hybrid crosses of P. 'Okame,' which is itself a hybrid. 'Okame' was brought from England to the U.S. through the Morris Arboretum in the 1940s, following the work by Captain Collingwood Ingram crossing *P. incisa* and *P. campanulata*.

'Okame' has single pink flowers, and

'First Blush' is a full double. 'First Blush' exhibited a host of other desirable attributes to support it as an introduction, according to Meacham. It has a uniform, upright oval habit; good symmetry; disease resistance; fragrant, prolific blooms; and foliage that holds up with a dark green color in summer that turns orange to orange-red in fall.

Selections from North Carolina State

As an introduction, 'First Blush' actually followed a year after the 2014 release of 'Pink Cascade', which was bred by Tom Ranney, professor at the Department of Horticultural Science, North Carolina State University (NCSU) in Mills River, North Carolina, and is licensed to JFS.

"It was one of those serendipitous >>>



Prunus serrulata 'Kwanzan'

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(Top) Pink Flair® Cherry (*Prunus sargentii* 'JFSKW58')

(Bottom) Pink Cascade® (*P.* 'NCPH1')

PHOTO COURTESY OF J. FRANK SCHMIDT & SON CO.

moments,” Meacham said. Although 10 years had passed since JFS’s last introduction of a Japanese flowering cherry tree — ‘Pink Flair’ in 2004 — two worthy introductions presented themselves in succession, the upright ‘First Blush’ and then the weeping ‘Pink Cascade.’

The NCSU flowering cherry breeding program, led by research specialist Nathan Lynch, has been active for more than 15 years, according to Ranney. ‘Pink Cascade’ was the program’s first introduction and what he called a “lucky” find: After crossing the parents, the two features the researchers were looking for — pink flower color and weeping habit — immediately appeared in the F1 hybrid.

“In a lot of cases, weeping habits can be recessive,” Ranney said. “You have to go multiple generations to draw out those phenotypes.” But not in this case. And ‘Pink Cascade’ had a third attractive characteristic: its size.

“There are other weeping cherries, but they tend to get big,” Ranney said. Reaching only 12 feet wide and tall at maturity, ‘Pink Cascade’ fits into moderate landscapes. It’s a great tree for small spaces.

As a group, flowering cherries are a significant commercial crop. The NCSU program will continue to look to introducing new varieties that offer substantial improvements on issues particular to the Southeast U.S. region: namely adaptability and pest resistance, but without overlooking novel or attractive ornamental traits.

Because of the vast genetic diversity *Prunus* and its various subgenera offer, there is immense potential for introductions to solve some of the problems flowering cherries have in the Southeast. Ranney believes there is the chance of the same benefit in other regions. So, the researchers at NCSU are creatively look-

ing at crosses with plants like the large *P.* ‘Accolade’ (20–25 feet tall by 20–25 feet wide, Zones 5–8), a hybrid of *P. sargentii* and *P. subhirtella*, with pink buds that open into soft pink, semi-double blooms and hang in clusters.

“They look like a cloud of cherry blossoms when in bloom,” Ranney said. “An allee of ‘Accolade’ in bloom is unforgettable.” The green leaves turn orange-yellow in fall, and in winter, the smooth red bark with horizontal lenticels adds winter season interest.

Ranney expects the next introduction from NCSU could be late 2021, but revealed only that it has “a unique combination of ornamental traits.” There’s no speculating whether the results will be from crosses with ‘Pink Cascade’, but Ranney

did say there will be future improvements of that cultivar as it is put into play as a parent for additional breeding.

“There is always room to improve, and some traits you need to grow out for a longer time,” Ranney said.

Looking to the future

In her role as yard buyer, Mack at Portland Nursery has at least two wishes for future flowering cherry introductions: variegation and dwarf characteristics. The three years it was available to her, Mack saw good sales of Lemon Splash® Weeping Cherry (*P. incisa* Lemon Splash® FPMSPPL PP# 23384), a variegated variety with white flowers. Likewise, Mack could always sell more of flowering cherry grafted to dwarf rootstock, but it is inconsistently available from growers.

“We have one grower, and we could sell a lot more if we had more availability,” she said.

For the future of tree sales, with house lots continuing to get smaller, it could be a sound idea. ☺

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