Diversity and Breeding of Flowering Cherry in Japan

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Abstract

In Japan, the flowering of the cherry tree (sebgenus *Cerasus)* in early spring has been a principal signal for farmers to begin rice cultivation. People in Japan therefore have a particular interest in cherry blossoms, and the species have a long and intricate history here. Nine native species of flowering cherry are present in Japan; they can be classified into three groups, Yamazakura, Miyamazakura, and Edohigan. More than 250 cultivars of Japanese flowering cherry have been selected or bred from these wild species. Two species, Oshimazakura and Edohigan, have specially contributed to the breeding of flowering cherry. Although Edohigan is distributed in most area of Japan, Oshimazakura belonging to the Yamazakura group is an endemic species around the Izu Peninsula. The breeding of flowering cherry cultivars is classified into three stages. Before the Azuchi-Momoyama era (1573-1603), about 20 cultivars were selected mainly from Yamazakura. During the first half of the Edo era (1603 - 1715), as Shoguns of the Tokugawa government ordered Daimyos to donate fantastic ornamental flowers including flowering cherry, about 30 cultivars with mutant phenotypes, such as many petals, were brought to Edo (Tokyo). After the last half of the Edo era (1716 -), more than 200 cultivars have been bred through natural and artificial hybridizations.

Keywords: cherry blossom; breeding; cultivar; artificial hybridization; genetic diversity