

## The Old Timer

*Bob Mayer*

More than ten years ago, I photographed an odd-looking tree growing in front of the Roxbury puddingstone outcropping on Valley Road. It was early May, and the tree was in bloom—sort of. One of the main branches was barren. It looked like the tree had been mistakenly passed over by the crews clearing away the dead and dying after a long winter. When I photographed the tree two years later, in 2009, the horticultural staff had visited, not to remove the tree but to prune it vigorously. The barren branch was gone, and the tree resembled a warty, one-eyed beast, sprouting feeble arms. I checked the metal tag: a Yoshino cherry (*Prunus* × *yedoensis* forma *perpendens*, accession 22542\*A). It was accessioned in 1925, a dozen years before my own birth date. Perhaps because of that, I developed an attachment to this aging—indeed ancient by cherry standards—tree despite its ungainly appearance, and I occasionally grabbed other images of the “old timer,” as I nicknamed it.

While the record label suggests this accession was grown from seed sent from the Imperial Botanical Garden in Tokyo, Japan, I learned that an important intermediate step was involved. The tree was grown as a seedling from another Yoshino cherry (accession 5351\*A), which arrived from the Imperial Botanical Garden (now known as the Koishikawa Botanical Garden) in 1902. The original tree grew near the Forest Hills Gate, and Charles Sprague Sargent often commented on the pink and white flowers. Even though the buds were regularly nicked by spring frosts, Sargent esteemed the hybrid as “one of the handsomest” cherries from Japan.

According to Donald Wyman—a long-time horticulturist at the Arboretum—the Arboretum’s original tree represented the first introduction of the Yoshino cherry into America. This predated a more famous gift of the hybrid (along with other Japanese cherries) to the city of Washington, DC, in 1912, where it formed

the basis of the famous planting that clouds the Tidal Basin with evanescent blossoms each spring. This lineage is especially significant given that, when Ernest Henry Wilson visited Japan in 1914 and 1915, he reported that forty-year-old trees at the Imperial Botanical Garden were the oldest known representatives of this hybrid (which is now considered a complex cross between *Prunus speciosa* and *P. subhirtella*) and that the original taxonomic description had been based upon them.

Wilson observed the old Yoshino cherries flowering at the Imperial Botanical Garden, with benches where visitors could sit beneath the outstretched branches. Despite the recent scientific recognition of the hybrid, Wilson described its omnipresence throughout Tokyo. “This is the Cherry so generally planted in the parks, temple grounds, cemeteries and streets,” he wrote in *The Cherries of Japan*, published in 1916. “Its flowers herald an annual national holiday decreed by the Emperor. In all over fifty thousand trees of this species are growing in the precincts of the city.” This celebration, known as *hanami*, is still enormously popular in Japan, and it is premised on appreciating ephemerality—a celebration of fleeting beauty.

After discovering the significant background of the old timer, I returned recently for another look. It seemed taller and statelier, now that I had uncovered its history. Horticultural care during my decade of observations had maintained—seemingly even resurrected—this old tree, which looked even healthier now than when I first encountered it. If the spring flowers symbolize the swift passage of the seasons, then the knobby form of this tree seems to extend this metaphor even further, embodying the passage of years. I’m confident the tree will survive much longer than this humbled observer.

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