

## MESSAGE FROM CONSUL-GENERAL SASAYAMA TAKUYA

April 2021

The number of new COVID-19 infections has unfortunately been increasing since late March. On the other hand, the number of people receiving vaccinations has also been increasing steadily in April due to innovations in the methods and pace of inoculation. In Japan also, healthcare workers and people age 65 and over are being inoculated. I would like everyone to continue following safety protocols in accordance with the information provided by your local authorities.

The past winter was mercifully short in Toronto, with less snow than most other years. Snow fell in Toronto on April 21, but this will probably be the last time for this season. The Sakura (Japanese flowering cherry), which had just started to bloom was covered in snow, resulting in cold but beautiful and calm scenery. For me, this was a welcome respite after having experienced the harsh winters of Ottawa the previous two years. Meanwhile, news from Japan recently were full of accounts of Sakura blossoming. Many locations apparently saw the earliest bloom in decades. The effects of the pandemic is undeniably enormous, but nature moves on regardless of human activity.

And now, Sakura is finally blossoming also here in Toronto.

This month, I would like to tell you about the relationship between Toronto and Sakura.

The location most famous for Sakura in the city is High Park. This vast park is run by the City of Toronto, and there is even a zoo on its grounds. The history of Sakura in High Park began in 1959, when then Ambassador of Japan to Canada HAGIWARA Toru presented 2,000 cherry trees to Toronto on behalf of the people of Tokyo. The donation was to thank Torontonians for welcoming Japanese Canadians who came here after World War II. Stories of the hardships experienced by Japanese Canadians interned during the war are still being told today. They faced discrimination even after the war and those who could not return to their homes in such places as British Columbia chose to settle here in Toronto.

In 1984, Mr. and Mrs. Yoriki and Midori Iwasaki, a philanthropic couple who were publishers of a Japanese Canadian newspaper, donated more Sakura trees to High Park. In 2001, the Sakura Project spearheaded by the Consulate-General of Japan in Toronto planted additional trees near those donated in 1959 as well as other locations. Most recently, additional trees were planted in 2019 to mark the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1959 donation.

This is the historical background to the Sakura in High Park which has become a seasonal tradition in early spring. Thanks in part to social media, the trees have become tremendously popular among Torontonians, and crowds pack the park when they are in full bloom. Because of the pandemic, while the park remains open this year, the City has made the trees available for viewing virtually online on its website.



The aim of the Sakura Project was to plant 3000 trees in Ontario. The Project concluded in 2012 after it planted trees at nearly 60 locations in Toronto and elsewhere in the province.

Because of this project, Sakura can now be enjoyed in Toronto on the campuses of the University of Toronto and York University, on the grounds of the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre and in parks such as Centennial Park. Locations in other parts of Ontario include the celebrated Niagara Parkway in Niagara Falls.



(Photo: Paul Whittam & University of Toronto)



(Photo: Stephen Qiao & University of Toronto)



Trinity Bellwoods Park



Exhibition Place

The Sakura Project planted trees in many Ontario municipalities with sister cities in Japan, such as Oakville (twinned with Neyagawa), Mississauga (twinned with Kariya), and others. There have even been Japanese municipalities which have reached out to donate Sakura to their respective Canadian sister cities. Sagami-hara, which is twinned with Toronto, planted 45 Sakura trees in Scarborough's Birkdale Ravine in 2015 and 2016. Meanwhile, Fujisawa also donated Sakura to Windsor's Jackson Park in 2017. Sakura trees donated by Itabashi, a ward of Tokyo, are planted in Burlington along Itabashi Way, as well as in Spencer Smith Park and Roly Bird Park. As well, in recent years, philanthropists Mr. James Matsumoto and Ms. Chako Setoyama are planting Sakura in Ontario out of their own initiative.

Due to the vastness of Canada, as well as its northern latitude and climate, it is not possible to plant Sakura everywhere in this country. In Ontario, for example, it is difficult to grow Sakura in the north. Despite such challenges posed by nature, we have been fortunate to have Sakura trees grow in many locales to provide citizens with places to relax. Needless to say, Sakura is an important symbol of Japan, and the blossoms which bloom each spring after a long winter give us a sense of well-being and hope for the future. I have described above the background of Sakura in Toronto, and it is no exaggeration to say that they have played a significant part in the history of Japan-

Canada relations. I consider Sakura to be a tremendously important asset for both countries and would like to protect and further develop it in the future.

SASAYAMA Takuya  
Consul-General of Japan