Families: Tips to Celebrate Cherry Blossoms and Japanese Culture this Spring

The cherry blossoms are blooming, and spring is in the air.

Washington DC’s most famous festival centers around the 3020 Cherry Blossom trees given as a gift from Japan to the United States in 1912.

“When the cherry blossoms bloomed,
They brought beauty to my heart.
— Tatsu-jo

In Japanese culture, many traditions are inspired by nature. Experiencing the seasons encourages us to take part in centuries old crafts such as origami or kite-making. What a great way to learn more about Japan while spending time with your children this spring!

To help, the Japan Information & Culture Center, Embassy of Japan has put together ideas, craft activities, workshops and events for families to enjoy this spring’s festival.
JAPANESE FOOD DAY

On March 22nd, school children across Washington, DC will take part in Japanese Food Day. They will enjoy a menu including Japanese omelets, soba noodle salad, and Japanese curry. The Embassy adopted school, LaSalle Backus Education Campus will also participate in Japanese inspired activities like origami, making koi nobori (fish kites) with KID Museum, and learning about Japanese food culture with TABLE FOR TWO USA.

If you’re not in Washington, DC, you can make your own Japanese food at home, or learn more about Japanese culture by visiting the Japan Information & Culture Center’s website and Facebook page.

EAT SUSHI AND TASTE WAGASHI

There are dozens of ways to experience Japanese food with your family. Everyone knows about Japan’s most famous food export, sushi. Eating sushi is a fun way to educate children about Japanese food.

Did you know the Japanese sweet called Wagashi is the only food that you can experience with all five senses? The colorful, all-natural, delicate Japanese sweets are inspired by the seasons and new to Washington DC. Visit Teaism in Penn Quarter or Union Market to ooh and ahh over these beautiful Japanese deserts, take some photos for Instagram, and taste them for yourself.

MAKE A PAPER CHERRY BLOSSOM OR CRANE

The Cherry Blossom or Sakura, is the symbol of Spring in Japan. As the beautiful pink blossoms bloom, Japanese people gather beneath the trees to play traditional games and eat delicious Japanese food. You and your children can follow along with this video to make pink cherry blossoms in celebration of the cherry blossom festival.

For the more advanced paper folders, why not try to make a crane? In Japan, the crane is a mystical creature and is believed to live for 1,000 years. Legend has it that if you make 1,000 paper cranes your wishes will come true. Follow these easy step by step instructions to make your first beautiful paper crane.

IKEBANA

Children can learn the centuries-old tradition of Japanese flower arranging at an ikebana workshop at the National Arboretum. The hour-long workshop is for children ages 10-13. You can also visit an ikebana demonstration and see the Ikebana International exhibit at the National Bonsai and Penjing Museum Exhibits Gallery. Sign up for the ikebana workshop at the US National Arboretum Classroom, April 15th from 1:00-2:00pm. Registration required. Ikebana demonstrations and exhibit throughout April. Visit the National Arboretum website for more details.

LET’S GO FLY A KITE

Since before Mary Poppins, children have loved to fly kites, but in Japan kite-making has been elevated to an art form. The Cherry Blossom Kite Festival showcases the skills of kite makers from across the country. Kids can make a kite at the hands-on activity station, watch the kite parade and experience the Rokkaku kite and tricks showdown. Visit Washington Monument on March 31 from 10am-4.30pm.
LANTERN LIGHTING AND CHERRY BLOSSOM PRINCESSES

Children will be inspired by the beauty of the Cherry Blossom Princesses dressed in their pink kimonos. The Cherry Blossom Princess Program is an educational and cultural program for women aged 19-24 from across the United States, including leadership workshops, building public speaking skills, and creating connections that can help with college applications and future employment.

The princesses light the 8.5-foot-tall Japanese stone lantern at the Tidal Basin as part of a truly spectacular celebration of the festival and the enduring friendship between Japan and the United States. Visit the Tidal Basin on April 8th 3:00pm.

EXPERIENCE J-POP

New York-based pop singer Kana Uemura will perform “J-Pop”, Japanese pop music and American pop music at a free concert suitable for children. Her play list includes her hit song “Goddess of the Toilet,” a whimsical ballad dedicated to her late grandmother who told her there was a god of beauty living in the toilet and if she cleaned the toilet carefully, she would grow up to be beautiful. Her song inspired both tears and laughter across Japan and was a #1 hit. Go to John F Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts on April 18, 6:00-7:00pm.

AMERICA’S BIGGEST JAPANESE STREET FESTIVAL

The Sakura Matsuri Street Festival is an explosion of Japanese food and culture, and great fun for children. Highlights include Japan Now, featuring the latest in video games and anime fashion and accessories, the children’s corner with fun cultural activities, and the culinary pavilion with the best of Japanese food plus Japanese beer and sake for the adults. Children aged 12 and under are free. Visit the Capitol River front neighborhood (M Street and New Jersey Avenue, SE), April 8, from 10.30am-6pm.

TAKE A HISTORY LESSON

The first 3,020 cherry blossom trees in Washington, DC were given as a gift from Japan and planted by the first lady and wife of the Japanese ambassador in 1912. Three years later, the United States sent dogwood saplings to Japan. The trees have become a symbol of how the friendship between Japan and America has taken root and is celebrated during the festival each year.

In Japan, the cherry blossom trees take on an even greater significance, where they represent the transience of the seasons and beauty of life, a strong theme in Buddhist culture. Thousands of people take the time to stop and appreciate the short but brilliant blooming season of the flowers and reflect on the brevity of life.

History, tradition, and appreciation of the natural elements play an important role in Japanese day to day life. Take the time to talk with your children about the cherry blossom trees in your neighborhood, visit the Tidal Basin, or take part in a cultural event and appreciate why the trees are such a potent symbol in Japanese culture.

For more information on Japanese culture, visit http://www.us.emb-japan.go.jp/jicc.