



Blooming gorgeous

Spectacular cherry blossom displays breaking out in the UK are the cheeriest

Sakura – the Japanese word for blossom – along with sushi and manga comics, has to count as one of Japan's most successful exports. Nature's own confetti, colours range from a delicate Farrow & Ball cream to vivid bubble-gum pink. Some are scented, others cascade in vast clusters, their flowers the showiest in spring's cavalcade of apple, pear and plum blossom.

As in Tokyo, the UK season usually starts in late March and can go – depending on the variety and the weather – to late April. (I say Tokyo because there are some subtropical areas of Japan where it starts in February.) Most experts think that this year's UK blossom will be early and will start in late March – in the south at least – because it's been a mild winter. But it's notoriously difficult to predict exactly when the buds open into flowers. A cold snap will keep them dormant, a sudden rise in temperatures will see them start to open. Climate change has also brought a whole new unpredictability to the blossom schedule.

The trees found in the city tend to be ornamental, while the native British cherry can produce fruit – and this time of year brings a heady extra of bees and other pollinators flitting from flower to flower. Alongside sakura is the concept of hanami – or “flower viewing” – when people visit parks and gardens to admire the trees. It's not a festival as such, more taking the chance to appreciate spring's most glorious show with friends and family, while also accepting that the blossoms will soon drift away. Grab the opportunity where you can.

1. London

London's parks all have their cherry fanatics. Thanks to the large number of cherry trees in Kensington Gardens, this particularly strong blossom showing means it's usually where the Japanese Conversation Group hold a hanami gathering. Greenwich Park also has a good collection, as does the southern end of Regent's Park. Meanwhile, Kew Gardens has its own Cherry Walk (pictured right), starting at the rose garden at the back of Palm House, leading to Temperate House (kew.org).

2. Keele University, Staffordshire

Keele University becomes conspicuously pink in April and May. Designated as an arboretum, there's been a significant



collection of flowering cherries across the campus since the 1940s. Now with National Collection status, there are more than 240 types of cherry trees to discover, and the range of varieties means that the blossom season lasts longer than in many other places. The university is free to visit and has maps of the different cherry trees available to download and at the Chancellor's Building (keele.ac.uk).

3. Harrogate

The avenues of ornamental cherries in the Stray, Harrogate's 200 acres of parkland in the town centre, were created in 1953 to celebrate the Queen's

coronation. Lasting for around 14 days, the explosion of blossom usually takes place a week or so later than in the south of England (visitharrogate.co.uk).

4. Edinburgh

On the south side of Edinburgh, with views of Arthur's Seat in the distance, the avenues of deep pink cherry blossom in the Meadows park bloom a little later, often stretching to the end of April and even into early May, but are one of the city's most magnificent sights. However, the mighty Yoshino cherry tree at the Royal Botanic Garden also has a significant fan base (rbge.org.uk).

sign that spring is here. Sarah Turner picks 12 spots for the best shows

5. Kingston Lacy, Dorset

The National Trust has a selection of historic places around the country where you can enjoy the blossom in splendid surroundings – and one of the most picturesque stately homes to experience the full cherry experience is Kingston Lacy. Its sakura experience starts with avenues along Blind Walk and in the Winter Garden, with even more in Nursery Wood. A dedicated Japanese garden, complete with a tea house and lanterns also features cherry blossom. It was created in the early 20th century by the house's owners. Adults £17.20, children £8.60; nationaltrust.org.uk. For more information on other National Trust properties where you can see spring blossoms go to nationaltrust.org.uk/features/places-to-spot-spring-blossom

6. Barfield Farm, Kent

This classic fruit farm near the village of Offham – run by the Malcolm family since the 1930s – produces around 8-12 tonnes of cherries in a good year. They range from Stella and Merton Glory varieties to the rare and highly prized Kent Nap. There is nothing quite like waking up in a cherry orchard in full bloom – which you can now do thanks to their four pods, with en suite showers, kitchenettes, sofa beds for children and beautiful views across the North Downs. From £105 for four people, including a breakfast box; orchardpods.co.uk



7. National Fruit Collection, Kent

Just outside Faversham, Brogdale has the largest collection of fruit trees in the world, including 285 varieties of cherry trees to admire. Bravely, given the unpredictability of the blossom season, it has decided that this year the cherry blossom will be at its peak on 18 and 19 April. This is the date they will hold the Brogdale's Hanami Festival with Japanese tea ceremonies, calligraphy

and origami demonstrations. There will also be a mix of blossom and bonsai tree appreciation. In July there will also be a cherry fair to celebrate the harvest. Adults £13.50, children aged 3-15 £6.50; brogdalecollections.org

8. National Botanic Garden of Wales, Carmarthenshire

Created in 2001, the Japanese Garden at the National Botanic Garden of Wales in Carmarthenshire features blossoms amid paths and pavilions. In a garden originally designed for the Chelsea Flower Show, it's one of the most serene spots in the 538-acre gardens and the perfect time to visit is throughout April. Adults £11.59, children aged 5-16 £8.50; botanicgarden.wales

9. RHS Wisley, Surrey

The Royal Horticultural Society's most visited garden, Wisley has 200 acres of land. Its cherry orchard, surrounded by apple and pear trees, is largely ornamental, but it is magnificent when in bloom with its collection of pink and white blossoms. There are ornamental cherry trees throughout the formal gardens, too. Adults £16.50, children aged 5-16 £8.50; rhs.org.uk

10. Doddington Hall, Lincolnshire

This privately owned stately home has been in the same family for 400 years and has four holiday cottages

around the estate. Doddington's Cherry Walk has a series of trees that have been planted over 50 years, including the highly decorative Taoyama Sakura. More recent plantings include the Tai Haku – Great White Cherry – and a *Prunus Serrula* with its shiny, mahogany bark. Double rooms from £109 including breakfast; doddingtonhall.com

11. High House, Suffolk

Situated near Orford, High Farm mostly specialises in apple and plum trees, but also has a half-acre cherry orchard. Its self-catering Broom Cottage sleeps up to five people and has pretty views overlooking the orchards and woodland beyond. The farm also has a small campsite for up to five tents. There's an on-site farm shop and the opportunity to pick your own fruit in season. Broom Cottage rents from £120 a night, camping from £8.50; high-house.co.uk



12. Gravetye Manor, Sussex

A grand hotel in Sussex, this was once the home of William Robinson, a Victorian gardener's son who became one of the most famous horticulturists and gardening writers of his generation. Most of the land – around 1,000 acres – is preserved in a trust, but the hotel has 35 acres, including a large orchard with cherry trees. It's pricey but well worth it as a treat to witness the blossom in full bloom in such opulent surroundings. If you stay for lunch (£48 per head), you can also take one of the daily garden tours for free (usually £25). Doubles from £295, including breakfast; gravetyemanor.co.uk ■

