

Spring in Washington

A letter from America by Fran Taylor

Here in the Washington area we have survived winter almost unscathed and are finally starting to feel the stirrings of spring. Washington winters can be quite cold and snowy, but are typically short. For most of the season we had some cold days and nights but not too much snow and nothing outside the normal range of winter. By the first week of March it was warming up nicely and the spring bulbs had started to flower, but we had a sudden reversion to the depths of winter the following weekend, with a brief blizzard, icy cold winds and a night with temperatures falling well into the teens Fahrenheit (-7 to -10 Celsius). But by the following day it was bright and sunny again and back above freezing, and spring was back on track, with the daffodils mostly unbowed.

The first inkling that winter does not last forever occurs on 2nd February – Groundhog Day. Although most people (especially outside the US) are most familiar with this event in the context of the 1993 film of that name, in which a television weatherman is inexplicably forced to re-live the same day over and over, the origins of Groundhog Day actually date back centuries. It is associated with the Celtic celebration of Imbolc (St Brigid's Day), and also the Christian festival of Candlemas.

In its current incarnation, it was brought to the US by German immigrants and since the late 19th Century, at the town of Punxsutawney in western Pennsylvania, a groundhog designated as Punxsutawney Phil has emerged from his burrow on a hill called Gobblers Knob. According to tradition, if it's sunny and Phil sees his shadow, then he goes back into hibernation and there will be 6 more weeks of winter. On the other hand, if it is overcast, then spring is 'right around the corner'. Phil is presented to the world in a dawn ceremony by his handlers who are members of the Inner Circle of the Groundhog Club, formally attired in tuxedos, top hats and gloves.

According to the Inner Circle, Phil's predictions are 100% accurate, however a scientific analysis puts his accuracy in the 30-40% range (but don't tell Phil that!). This year, he saw his shadow, which might explain the recent storm! Occasionally there are mishaps – in 2021, Phil's New York counterpart Chuck died after being dropped by NY City mayor Bill de Blasio. It is also said that at the 2009 ceremony, Chuck bit the previous NYC mayor Michael Bloomberg.

We are now looking forward to one of the highlights of Washington spring – the flowering of the Japanese cherry trees around the Tidal Basin. These beautiful blossoms have a storied history. The idea of planting them along the Potomac was first mooted in 1885 by travel writer Eliza Scidmore who had seen them in Tokyo. It was not until 1910, after the cause was taken up by Helen, wife of President William Howard Taft, that the first 2000 trees were presented by the citizens of Tokyo as a symbol of friendship. To the great embarrassment of everyone involved, the trees were found to be infested with insects and had to be burned, but undaunted, the Japanese replaced them in 1912 with a further 3000 (this time, healthy) specimens.

Since that date, they have remained a much-loved feature of the Washington skyline. They have endured a few indignities over the decades – in the 1930s the engineers constructing the Jefferson Memorial attempted to remove some of them, but were interrupted by an outraged horde of society

ladies, clad in furs and wielding shovels, who proceeded to chain themselves to the trees. After Pearl Harbor, a few were felled by angry citizens, and they were renamed 'Oriental Cherry Trees' for the remainder of World War II. In the 1990s, a family of beavers took up residence in the Tidal Basin and proceeded to chomp their way through a number of the trees. The culprits were eventually apprehended by the Park Service and 'relocated to an undisclosed location' according to a tight-lipped official.

Towards the end of February, the Parks Service inspects the tree buds and predicts when the peak blooms will appear. The timing is very dependent on the length and severity of the winter. This year the blossoms are predicted to peak on 24th March, which is a week earlier than the recent average of 31st March. It is thought that the buds are not yet sufficiently developed to have been damaged by last weekend's unseasonable snowstorm, but it may delay them by a day or two. Once in bloom, they only last a few days, and flowering can easily be disrupted by a late hard frost or windy, stormy weather. The beautiful pictures here were taken around dawn a couple of years ago by my good friend and excellent photographer Tammy Tideswell.

After the cherry blossoms, we look forward to an absolute riot of spring colour as other flowering trees and shrubs, especially azaleas and redbuds, take their turns to remind us of happier and warmer days ahead.



