



# Curriculum Connections

## *When the Sakura Bloom*

by Narisa Togo

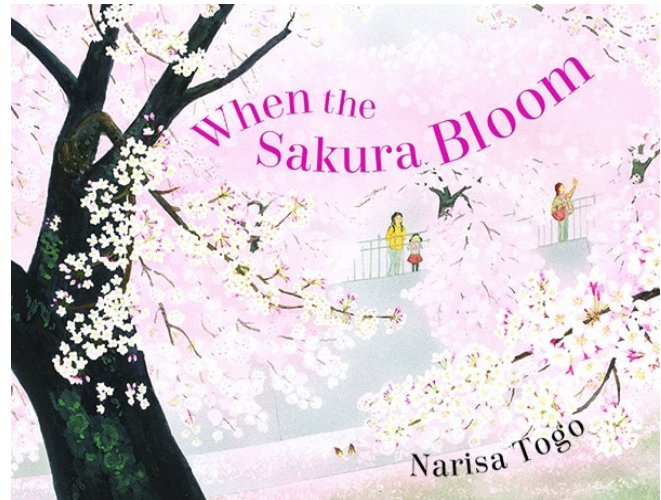
Berbay Publishing, 2022

Fiction, set in Japan

2022 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Children's Literature

### 1) Summary

The children's story *When the Sakura Bloom* by Narisa Togo is a sweet tale of Japanese flowering cherry trees (Sakura) responding to the seasons. At first it is late winter, and the trees are dormant. In early March they are still leaf-less. People pass by as they continue with their busy lives. As spring starts to take hold of the lively town (which could be any town or city in Japan), the Sakura trees start to show little green buds. As the trees begin to blossom, the birds visit the new blooms, and people in the community start to notice the clouds of pink blossoms around them. Soon, the town is preparing for the Sakura festival (*matsuri*). The event brings people together to celebrate the start of spring and cherry blossom season. People gather to picnic under the trees, as the birds sit in the branches above. Soon, a storm sweeps in and blows the bright pink blossoms to the ground, creating another iconic image of springtime in Japan. As green leaves appear on the trees, people start to go back to the hustle and bustle of their daily lives. They will wait another year to celebrate cherry blossom season again.



### 2) Analysis

Since the book is meant for primary school children, the analysis of *When the Sakura Bloom* should be straightforward. The story takes us through the typical life cycle of a Sakura tree during the spring, from the time that it is dormant, to blossoming, to losing its blossoms and gaining its leaves. We catch a brief glimpse of the social cycle of the community as well. At first, people are caught up in their busy lives, but as the blossoms open, they notice and take time to appreciate nature, and in turn nature dictates to them an important time of celebration, heralding in the spring. The intertwining tales of the blossoming Sakura trees and the community's response to



# Curriculum Connections

## *When the Sakura Bloom*

by Narisa Togo

Berbay Publishing, 2022

Fiction, set in Japan

2022 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Children's Literature

them reflect an intricate symbiotic relationship between nature and the community around it. Spring ushers in changes in the community as people pause to witness the transformation of the trees. And as they appreciate and celebrate the changing of the seasons, the people may continue to be inspired by the Sakura trees and plant more of them or at least tend to them. Although it's a short book, *When the Sakura Bloom* does a decent job at conveying just how intertwined the natural and human worlds can be.

### 3) Cultural and Historical Themes

Cultural and historical themes associated with Sakura trees appear throughout the story. A teacher may need to have a deeper understanding of certain facets of Japanese culture, spirituality, and history to notice some of these cultural and historical themes, but once understood, they are not difficult to communicate. Here are some of the cultural and historical themes:

#### a) Shinto

Shinto, the indigenous faith of Japan, is usually translated "the way of the gods," or *kami* (pronounced: KAH-me), deities that pervade every aspect of the natural world. This animistic view of the natural world extends to cherry trees, with the blooming of the trees tied to spiritual and natural renewal. Shinto has organized system of shrines and priests, but Shinto beliefs extend far beyond any organized type of theology.

#### b) Matsuri and Hanami

It goes without saying that Sakura trees are associated with the Sakura festivals (*matsuri*) held throughout Japan. Festivals are tied to Japanese history, geography, and spirituality. They continue to mark important moments on the Japanese calendar and in the spiritual centers of the country. Deeply connected to the agricultural roots of Japan and to the rites and rituals of Shinto, *matsuri* are usually held in neighborhoods or Shinto shrine and Buddhist temple areas to connect to the cycles of nature (harvest festivals, New Year festivals, etc.) or to pay homage to the history or deities associated with a particular shrine or



# Curriculum Connections

## *When the Sakura Bloom*

by Narisa Togo

Berbay Publishing, 2022

Fiction, set in Japan

2022 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Children's Literature

temple. In the context of Sakura blooming, the *matsuri* are known as Hanami (flower viewing), otherwise known as cherry blossom viewing festivals. During Hanami, vendor booths are set up in communities as families gather for picnics and outings to view the Sakura trees during their peak blossoming time. These types of Hanami viewing opportunities are a cultural staple of Japanese society and are celebrated across the country. Sakura trees have been planted in many places in the U.S., and some communities sponsor Hanami. Look in your area for an opportunity for your students to participate in Hanami.

### **c) A Symbol of Impermanence (*mujō*) but also Friendship**

The link between nostalgia and melancholy, the cyclical nature of life, and the basic fact nothing lasts forever are key elements in the Japanese philosophical outlook. Heavily influenced by Buddhist, Confucian, and even Shinto sensibilities, the concept of *mujō* (impermanence) influences many distinct aspects of Japanese culture. The idea of *mujō* is an influential force on Japanese art and aesthetics and has influenced everything from people's approach to life to how they build their homes. In the context of Sakura trees, the fleeting and impermanent nature of life takes on new meaning as it is associated with the brief blooming period of the Sakura tree. In addition to representing impermanence, Sakura is also a symbol of lasting friendship and bonds that weather the test of times. Just as the Sakura trees endure until the next year to bloom again, the friendship between two people who have exchanged a cherry blossom (or Sakura tree) will endure just as strongly.

### **4) Relevance and Reflection: Connecting Across Cultures**

*Celebrations of Spring, Highlighting Picnic-type Holidays*

*Matsuri* (festivals) are time-honored traditions that continue to have elements of preindustrial social gatherings that have largely vanished from the fabric of American society, at least when it comes to spring celebrations. If a teacher wants to make connections across cultures, they could highlight the similarities between the popular elements of Sakura festivals and popular Easter traditions (brightly colored eggs, sweet



# Curriculum Connections

## *When the Sakura Bloom*

by Narisa Togo

Berbay Publishing, 2022

Fiction, set in Japan

2022 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Children's Literature

---

candy, bunnies and chicks), or consider how the Fourth of July is celebrated (picnics, outdoor gatherings, concerts, and fireworks). While certain symbolic or historical elements may make the material more complex for younger students to understand, compare-and-contrast assignments and/or easy research projects can help students to see the similarities between celebrations in different cultures.

### 5) Appropriate Grade Levels

The appropriate grade levels for *When the Sakura Bloom* would be between pre-school and second grade. This book is intended for early readers who are still grasping the fundamentals and developing their attention spans. This book would work well in first- and second-grade classrooms to help make larger cultural connections and inferences tied into both English and Social Studies lessons.

### 6) Activities

Given the appropriate grade levels as mentioned in section 5, the types of activities a teacher can do within the classroom vary greatly. For the sake of expediency and to give "building-blocks" type ideas to help teachers start from a place where students can learn about Japan, here are some "first steps" that teachers could use in the classroom before performing more complex tasks with elementary students.

- 1) **Crafts and Games** – Focus on crafts and games that bring the book to life for students in a way that helps them connect with Japanese culture and Sakura festivals. Cut pink paper into the shape of cherry blossoms, then have children draw on them in a style that helps them to feel ownership over their creation and a deeper connection to cherry blossoms. If teachers want to go beyond crafts, then they could expand into the realm of Japanese games. These would help students to connect with the type of games Japanese children themselves may play as they are out picnicking with their families during Sakura/Hanami festivals. These games could be as simple as chopsticks (<https://www.activityvillage.co.uk/chopsticks-game>) or as complex as teaching them to play with a *kendama*.



# Curriculum Connections

## *When the Sakura Bloom*

by Narisa Togo

Berbay Publishing, 2022

Fiction, set in Japan

2022 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Children's Literature

- 
- 2) **Food Tasting** – The students could be introduced to Japanese foods, such as ramen, onigiri, sushi, and mochi. Starting with the most basic forms of Japanese food and going through the particular of how to eat each food would help students understand Japanese culture in a more direct and kinesthetic fashion. (Be careful to navigate any dietary restrictions and food allergies among students in your class.)
- 3) **Outdoor Field Trip: Environmental Appreciation** — After learning about Sakura trees, students could go on a field trip to their local park to listen to their teacher or a park employee introduce them to different species of trees and how they have certain relationships with the wildlife found in the park. If there is an environmental center connected to the park, students can engage in activities like looking at tree bark and leaves under a microscope, shading leaves with a piece of paper and pencil to examine the particular shapes and veins of leaves, and possibly take a closer look at the blossoms and fruit associated with each tree as they bloom in the spring or summer.

### 7) Common Core Standards

#### **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.K.1**

With prompting and support, ask and answer questions about key details in a text.

#### **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.K.2**

With prompting and support, retell familiar stories, including key details.

#### **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.K.3**

With prompting and support, identify characters, settings, and major events in a story.

#### **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.K.4**

Ask and answer questions about unknown words in a text.

#### **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.K.5**

Recognize common types of texts (such as storybooks, poems, and so on).

#### **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.K.6**

With prompting and support, name the author and illustrator of a story and define the role of each in telling the story.



# Curriculum Connections

## *When the Sakura Bloom*

by Narisa Togo

Berbay Publishing, 2022

Fiction, set in Japan

2022 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Children's Literature

---

### **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.K.7**

With prompting and support, describe the relationship between illustrations and the story in which they appear (for example, consider what moment in a story an illustration depicts).

### **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.K.9**

With prompting and support, compare and contrast the adventures and experiences of characters in familiar stories.

### **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.K.10**

Actively engage in group reading activities with purpose and understanding.

## **8) Literature & Media Connections**

### **a. Elementary Texts & Media**

In terms of media or additional books that could be used to help supplement this book in the classroom, consider the Smithsonian and National Cherry Blossom Festival websites, which provide materials students can view and teachers can use to facilitate a lesson or add to in-progress lesson planning. The links are provided here:

- i. Smithsonian: <https://learninglab.si.edu/collections/virtual-field-trip-resources-cherry-blossom-festival/MI5gfdW6vXZVG8B0>
- ii. National Cherry Blossom Festival: <https://nationalcherryblossomfestival.org/media/>

Below are three other books that can be used within an elementary school context to help build upon this text for students interested in learning more about the topic of Sakura/Hanami festivals:

- 1) *Sakura's Cherry Blossoms* by Robert Paul Weston
- 2) *Cherry Blossoms* by James Ulak
- 3) *Pinkalicious: Cherry Blossom* by Victoria Kann

**Author:** Matthew Kizior, M.Ed., Central Catholic High School, Pittsburgh, PA  
2026