

The Story of Planting Cherry Blossoms in Syria

Japan-Syria Cooperation Association
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The English text below is a translation of the Japanese video presentation and corresponds to the slide numbers.

[1] Hello, everyone. I would like to tell you a story about planting cherry blossoms in Syria. Syria may not be a familiar country for many of you, Japanese, as there is not much information about it reaching Japan. Along with the story of planting cherry blossoms, I would like to introduce Syria as a nation and talk about the people's lives, thoughts, and attractions.

First, I will explain why we decided to plant cherry blossoms and then share the journey from the first cherry planting event to the second one held last year.

I am the representative of the Japan-Syria Cooperation Association and have been a mathematics teacher at Tokyo Institute of Technology and Shibaura Institute of Technology.

[2] About 35 years ago, I received a call from one of my former students from Tokyo Institute of Technology. She said, "We have an interesting Syrian person in our research team as a JICA trainee, and he will be here for a year. I would like to introduce him to you, so would you come to our gathering?" I went and became friends with that Syrian man. (He became the representative from the Syrian side when we decided to plant cherry blossoms together twenty years later.)

During the times we met in Tokyo, I became highly interested in Syria, wondering what kind of country it was. The following year, I traveled to Syria alone. It took me eight days to travel around Syria by using various bus routes. During this trip, I thought, "Syria is such a wonderful country! I would love to introduce it to many people in Japan someday."

[3] This is a map of Syria. Although Syria is often considered a desert country, it is an agricultural nation. It is 100% self-sufficient in agricultural products, such as high-quality wheat, olives, and pistachios that are highly regarded worldwide.

The country is approximately half the size of Japan.

The majority religion in Syria is Islam, but the state does not impose religious beliefs on its citizens. Muslims have the freedom to wear or not wear headscarves, drink alcohol, pray, or not pray.

People in Syria live a moderate and introspective life based on their faith, quite different from religious states like Afghanistan or Iran.

Syria is a highly educated society, and the university entrance exams, following the French Baccalaureate system, are quite challenging. Aspiring students attend cram schools and study hard to prepare for the exams.

Universities, of course, are co-educational, and women have made remarkable progress in society, with many holding ministerial positions.

As shown on this map, Syria is home to numerous World Heritage sites, each with a history spanning thousands of years. Many of these sites are made of stone, preserving many of their original features. Even the narrow alleyways in cities hold a surprising amount of charm. The major cities currently are Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs.

[4] My first trip to Syria was in 1990. I traveled like this:

[5] These are the ruins along the Euphrates River, a city that was destroyed by the Sassanian Empire 750 years ago.

[6] I met various people during my journey.

[7] Here is a group of elementary school students visiting the ruins. When I asked them to line up for a photo, they readily obliged. Syrians are fond of taking pictures.

[8] On the bus, I made friends with a young Kurdish man who invited me to stay at his home for two nights. His sister was a university student in Aleppo and had just returned home. Both of them spoke English well. We had discussions about various topics, including the Kurdish issue. His mother prepared delicious meals for us.

[9] This is his family. I felt completely at ease and welcomed by them. They are a wonderful family.

[10] The children were friendly and adorable.

[11]

[12] Through this trip, I realized that Syrians are incredibly kind. Whenever I got lost, they would patiently guide me and sometimes even accompany me. They never asked for money in return. I was often treated to tea, and when boarding a bus, I was sometimes told, "It's on us," and allowed to ride for free. Experiences like these are common for anyone who visits Syria. Every person who has been to Syria becomes an enthusiastic fan of the country. Most of the volunteers currently involved in assisting Syrian refugees are people who fell in love with Syria due to such experiences.

The security is excellent, and it is entirely safe for foreigners to walk alone at night. I have never witnessed any fights or disturbances on the streets.

Syrian cuisine and sweets are incredibly delicious and internationally renowned. I find them delicately refined, akin to Japanese cuisine. For me, the sophistication of a nation's cuisine reflects its cultural level."

[13] Moreover, Syria boasts a myriad of charms. With a history spanning thousands of years and a convergence of various cultures and civilizations, the scale of its archaeological sites is immense. Syria once stood at the center of the world's cultures. Let me introduce you to a few ancient cities.

[14] Aleppo is Syria's second-largest city, filled with antiquity. Walking through its streets, you'll come across venerable churches and mosques.

[15] The city also features many beautiful backstreets, making it a delightful experience to stroll around. Unfortunately, much of this beautiful city has suffered considerable damage due to the ongoing civil war.

The jasmine vines above this alley emit a pleasant fragrance. Jasmine is abundant throughout Syria, and its small white flowers spread a delightful scent across the town during the appropriate season. For Syrians, the aroma of jasmine holds special significance as it is a fragrance they have been familiar with since childhood.

[16] Taking an evening walk along the backstreets is equally captivating.

[17] Like in any Arab country, behind high stone walls, one can find comfortable courtyards where families and friends gather in the evening to enjoy pleasant moments together while sipping tea. Arabs hold their families and friends in high regard.

[18] This is Aleppo's market, known as the "Souk." The Aleppo Souk dates back to ancient times and was designated a World Heritage site. However, much of it has unfortunately been destroyed by the war.

[19] A glimpse of the bustling market inside.

[20] Another view of the market. At that time, donkeys were permitted inside the Souk. Such scenes are rare nowadays, making this photo all the more precious.

[21] This is Aleppo Castle. Originally, this hill housed temples and fortifications from ancient times, but in the 12th century, Saladin built the castle to counter the Crusaders. It was known as an

impregnable fortress, but sadly, it suffered considerable damage during the Syrian civil war.

[22] The ancient city of Bosra. I have revisited this city several times, but I always feel a sense of wonder. The buildings, made of black basalt, give the impression of recently burned structures, but in reality, this city was abandoned over 500 years ago.

[23] There are remnants of a Roman-era amphitheater. Interestingly, the whole structure was fortified to prepare for the Crusaders. Due to its excellent acoustics, music festivals are held here.

[24] These are traces of ancient dwellings.

[25] A narrow alley in the old city.

[26] This large waterwheel is in the city of Hama and has been in operation from ancient times until recently. It was used for lifting water and has a diameter of 20 meters. The scale becomes evident when you compare it to the person in the photo.

[27] In a village called "Maaloula," ancient Aramaic, the language spoken during Jesus' time, is still spoken. This small mountainous village even sells Aramaic tapes, which I bought. Of course, I don't understand the language, but I found it fascinating. I've heard that this village was temporarily occupied by the Islamic State (IS). I wonder how it is now.

[28] The interior of a church.

[29] The Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, built in the 8th century, is considered the oldest mosque in the world. It's a remarkably beautiful mosque and serves as a gathering place for people. Fortunately, it hasn't suffered any damage during the civil war. This location has been home to various temples and shrines since ancient times, continuously being rebuilt throughout history. Before being a mosque, it was a Christian church, and before that, it housed a temple of another religion.

[30] When the church was converted into a mosque, they discovered the head of John the Baptist, which had been ordered by Salome to be killed. The Umayyad Mosque holds this relic with great care.

[31] Damascus also has a large, old Souk (marketplace). Luckily, it hasn't been affected by the war.

[32] In 2008, I took my second trip to Syria.

[33] I stayed with my friend Mustafa and his family, whom I first met in Tokyo. It had been 18 years since we last met. Their eldest son was just a baby during my first trip to Syria. As you can see in

the photos, they are a very lovely family. Generally, in Arab countries, children are cherished, and family bonds are strong. [34] While having morning tea and discussing cultural exchange between Japan and Syria, Mustafa casually mentioned, "It would be nice if Damascus had a street lined with cherry blossoms." That remark instantly filled my mind with an image of cherry trees lining the streets of Damascus, and I thought it was a fantastic idea. Cherry blossoms are a symbol of Japan, and Syrians have a deep admiration for Japan. I believed introducing the cherry blossom culture, such as Ohanami (flower viewing), would be an excellent idea and something we should make happen!

[35] However, I started to worry about whether cherry blossoms would actually bloom in Syria.

[36] After returning home, I researched and found that the annual temperature curves of Damascus and Tokyo were quite similar! While the precipitation might be lower in Damascus, it could be supplemented with water. With this reassurance, I wholeheartedly threw myself into realizing the cherry blossom planting.

I established the "Japan-Syria Cooperation Association" and created flyers introducing Syria and the cherry blossom planting, which I distributed at various gatherings, talking to people about it. However, sadly, there was very little interest from people regarding Syria.

[37] Then, the Tokyo newspaper featured an article on the project, and I believe it had a significant impact. At the time, I was a mathematics teacher at Shibaura Institute of Technology, so I approached my students and recruited them to join. But when I realized that involving my own students might lead to various complications, I decided to open the tree-planting tour to the public.

The photo shows a place inside the National Library where valuable calligraphy was kept. The person in the black clothing was the director of the library. We discussed the comparison between Japanese calligraphy and the Arabic calligraphy, and it was a stimulating conversation.

[38] In preparation for the cherry blossom project, I visited Syria the previous year. The photo shows the Japanese Ambassador, Mr. Kunieda, in the bottom left. I also met with staff from the JICA Damascus Office.

[39] The Minister of Agriculture was also a member of the cherry blossom project. Similarly, the Minister of Environment delighted with the cherry blossom project. The Minister of Environment was

a woman and was very beautiful. None of the women in the picture were wearing scarves.

[40] Aleppo University's campus was chosen as the site for planting the cherry blossoms, and we selected the locations within the campus.

[41] The Syrian Embassy in Tokyo provided full support for the project. The woman in the photo is the Syrian Ambassador, and she was very pleased with the cherry blossom project.

[42] Finally, we started recruiting participants for the cherry blossom planting tour. The flyer displayed in this photo shows the details of the 10-day tour, including almost all meals, with prices set at 210,000 yen for the general public and 195,000 yen for students. It was an incredibly reasonable price. Twelve people participated in the general recruitment, including students, housewives, and retirees, and about 30 people expressed interest in joining the tour next year.

During the tour, we stayed at Sheraton hotels in Aleppo and Damascus for one night each. Thanks to the JICA Damascus Office Director, they were able to negotiate with the hotels, and we got a nearly 50% discount.

[43] The flyer text reads:

"Damascus, the capital of Syria, boasts an 8,000-year history, making it the world's oldest continuously inhabited city, designated as a World Heritage site.

It's a city with a rich culture and history that bloomed with Greek, Roman, Byzantine, and Arab influences, preserving these cultural and historical legacies.

As a western endpoint of the Silk Road, we have a deep connection with Japan. To foster this exchange, we've decided to create a cherry blossom-lined street in this city.

This year, we will plant 100 cherry trees, and our goal is to plant 1,000 trees over the next five years.

In a few years, the streets of Damascus will be filled with cherry blossoms, delighting many people.

Please join us in this momentous first tour."

[44] We brought 100 cherry saplings, bundled in two sets of 50 each. The person with only their feet visible in the photo was the person who arranged the saplings for us. His name is Mr. Takahashi, a horticulturist who has been planting cherry trees in Himalayan villages for 20 years, annually. I had the opportunity to visit one of these Himalayan villages with him five years later, in

2015. It's amazing to think about the different people we encounter in the world.

[45] We planted cherry trees at the Teshreen Park in Damascus.

[46] JICA's volunteers also joined us for the tree planting, and it was a lively and enjoyable event with coverage from television and newspapers.

[47] We also planted trees in the compound of the Ministry of Interior.

[48] We planted cherry trees at the Peace Memorial Grove on the Golan Heights. The Golan Heights served as a buffer zone between Israel and Syria, guarded by UN forces.

[49] The Peace Memorial Grove is an olive grove where famous people such as the Pope and Mohammed Ali have planted trees. It was meticulously maintained. We planted a cherry sapling in a prominent location facing the road, and I was sure that in 10 years, the grand cherry trees would catch people's attention. However, I heard that this olive grove, too, was destroyed by Israel.

[50] We planted cherry trees inside Aleppo University's campus, with students and staff enthusiastically participating in the event.

[51] The food in Syria was also delicious.

[52] The fruits, vegetables, and sweets were all very tasty, and we were even free to drink beer.

[53] We were invited by the mayor of Palmyra and enjoyed dancing inside a large tent.

[54] We were treated to a wonderful feast.

[55] The dish in the photo is chicken with cashew nuts and other ingredients.

[56] The next day, we visited the Palmyra ruins. Palmyra was an ancient caravan city that thrived in the 3rd century during the Roman era. It's a remarkably beautiful archaeological site.

[57]

[58] Sadly, the magnificent UNESCO World Heritage Site of Palmyra was also significantly damaged by the Islamic State (IS). It's a deeply regrettable situation. The reconstruction of Palmyra is highly anticipated by people and various organizations worldwide.

[59] We took a commemorative photo in front of Aleppo Castle.

[60] A Syrian newspaper published this photo. The top is in Arabic, and the bottom is in English.

[61] We took a commemorative photo with the Crusader castle of Krak des Chevaliers in the background. This castle was preserved

in perfect form since it fell without any bloodshed. I'm not sure if this castle was damaged during the recent civil war.

[62] Shortly after returning to Japan from Syria, the civil war broke out. This came as a complete surprise to both us and our Syrian friends. Syria seemed to be doing well economically, and people seemed to be looking forward to a bright future. We didn't sense any oppressive atmosphere from the government. We heard from people that strong leadership was necessary for countries facing instability in the Middle East, and we agreed.

[63] We were eager to understand the reasons behind the civil war, so we organized lectures and seminars titled "Praying for Peace in Syria." These events took place at the Yokohama Institute for Culture and Information and the Yokohama Port Opening Memorial Hall. These venues were large halls and were filled with many people, showing a high level of interest.

We also considered accepting Syrian students to study in Japan and made efforts to lobby various organizations. However, we found that enough financial support wasn't available, and the plan eventually fell through. As a result, we decided to suspend the activities of the friendship association until the situation in Syria stabilizes and we can resume planting cherry trees.

[64] Despite the intensifying civil war in Syria, the cherry blossoms were almost wiped out. However, the media showed interest in the cherry trees planted in Syria, and articles about the project were featured in Tokyo Shimbun, Kanagawa Shimbun, NHK, and other media outlets.

[65] A segment about the project was featured on NHK's "Korede Wakatta Sekai no Ima" ("Now I Understand the World"). The chalkboard was filled with drawings of cherry blossoms. The host of the show is Mr. Inoue.

[66] This is Mr. Packun, another member of the project.

[67] Tokyo Shimbun conducted an independent investigation and discovered that one of the cherry trees in Homs was still surviving. They published an article about it. The photo showed the cherry tree we planted, but it appeared to be infested with pests and on the verge of dying. However, when the newspaper's reporter contacted the park's caretaker and informed him that the tree was planted from Japan, he promised to take good care of it.

[68] A year later, Tokyo Shimbun published another article about the same cherry tree. This time, the tree was flourishing with blossoms, and next to it was the caretaker's beautiful smile. The caretaker had diligently provided fertilizer, pest control, and

careful watering for the tree, and they were grateful for their efforts. Seeing this photo made me want to meet the caretaker in person.

[69] However, Syria was still amidst the civil war, and I thought it would be impossible to go there. But I had the desire to express my gratitude in person. So, I called Mustafa, and he assured me that Syria was already at peace, saying, "It's safe to come."

Nevertheless, whenever Japan's media reported on Syria, they always began with the preamble, "In war-torn Syria." The country's peaceful situation seemed doubtful, but I thought to myself that as long as I didn't get hit by bullets, it should be okay. So, I decided to go.

Regarding the cherry saplings, I planned to take around five or six and have them temporarily planted somewhere in Syria until they could be properly transferred at the right time. We decided on October as the travel date and kept in touch.

However, Mustafa said he needed more time to prepare for the planting, so we postponed the trip to December, and this time, I decided to take 50 cherry saplings.

『70』 Concerns about planting cherry trees in Syria were numerous this time:

1. First and foremost, according to the travel information from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Syria is classified as Level 4, which means it is a country one should not travel to. Therefore, I had to go alone and couldn't invite others to join me.

2. Furthermore, Damascus Airport was not operational due to Israeli bombings, so I had to enter Syria overland from Lebanon. The cherry tree saplings needed to undergo quarantine in Lebanon, and I heard that Lebanese quarantine measures were very strict, and if the saplings were found, they might be confiscated. This worried me greatly. However, miraculously, the saplings passed through without any issues.

3. Additionally, around that time, I wasn't feeling well, and I wanted to rest at home. I thought I couldn't postpone the trip, and it seemed like there was no choice. But luckily, two people expressed their interest in participating, and they were able to join me midway. They took on various tasks, which was a great help.

4. I also had concerns about how the Syrian people would feel about planting cherry trees. Syria is a country facing a serious refugee crisis, with half of its population living outside the country in harsh conditions. Among the remaining half in Syria, I worried that planting cherry trees might not be well-received and could

potentially provoke backlash. However, as I will explain later, it turned out that such concerns were unwarranted. The citizens were very supportive. Syrian people inherently have a strong sense of aesthetics, and they possess a good sense of living. Planting cherry trees together and witnessing the blooming flowers lifted the spirits of the Syrian people.

5. When I visited Syria, as Mustafa had mentioned, the country had indeed returned to a state of peace. While some parts of the northern region were still experiencing war, it can be deemed safe to say that Syria as a whole had regained stability.

[71] On this trip, we planted cherry trees in six locations.

[72] This is the newly established medical center. The woman in the picture is the center's director, wearing a scarf.

[73]

[74] Cherry tree planting at Umayyad Park with the Minister of Agriculture and Damascus' mayor. Flags and banners were displayed to create a festive atmosphere.

[75] The Mayor of Damascus.

[76] The Minister of Agriculture seemed to be a Japan enthusiast. He was planting the trees with a joyful demeanor. He also asked if we could help turn an adjacent park into a Japanese garden.

[77] Local residents also participated in the tree planting.

[78] A press report covering the discussions in the Minister's office.

[79] This is the Ecological Garden, located next to the old city wall. It's a beautiful historic garden maintained and managed by a volunteer group.

[80] The garden endured great hardships during the civil war.

[81] The woman in the central green coat was the head of the garden. She was a dignified person with a strong sense of mission.

[82] The garden, facing the old city wall, exudes a peaceful atmosphere.

[83] The plants were neatly categorized and planted in separate islands.

[84] We planted cherry trees here.

[85] This was a café restaurant within the garden. It's open to the public, where people can enjoy coffee and read books. We had a meal here, and some of the people in the photo are plant experts.

[86]

[87] The next day, we headed to Homs. Homs is the third-largest city in Syria, located between Damascus and Aleppo, about 140 km from Damascus. Homs was said to be one of the first cities to be destroyed during the civil war. I was worried that the road

might be dangerous, but it turned out to be safe. However, gasoline was in short supply, making long-distance travel difficult. Gasoline could be bought legally up to 20 liters per month at the regular price, but anything more had to be purchased through black market sales, and it was incredibly expensive. Along the roadside, there were people selling gasoline in small quantities like this.

[88] This is the one remaining cherry tree in Homs, and it was thriving. The man in the photo is Hassan, who managed the tree.

[89] A commemorative photo taken with the cherry tree. This photo was published in the newspaper.

[90] This place was newly built as a children's park. Twelve years ago, it was still under construction, with children's rides, fun towers, and various play areas being built.

[91] There was a vivid memory of this large bee being built.

[92] Twelve years ago, the Governor of Homs was enthusiastic about the cherry blossom project and expressed a desire to plant 1,000 cherry trees in Homs alone. However, the city was heavily damaged during the intense civil war, and I don't know what happened to the governor afterward.

[93] The vacant space in this facility was used for youth training. They practiced singing, playing musical instruments, and dancing. It became evident that the city was trying to foster and support the youth, the new and fresh energy of the town.

[94] I felt the presence of new, young energies.

[95] From newspaper articles.

[96] Old restaurants have remained intact.

[97] Before the civil war, the streets of Homs were bustling with people and cars.

[98] Present-day backstreets. It was quiet, and hardly any people were seen. There were some buildings destroyed ahead, but I didn't take photos.

[99] On the same day, we returned to Damascus and the next day, we went to Damascus University. After a brief presentation, we planted cherry trees with students and professors.

[100] The professor of botany asked me various questions about the roots of the cherry trees.

[101] This was Alsubki Park in the city. We planted cherry trees here early in the morning with volunteers who were involved in the park's maintenance.

[102] This park was once beautifully maintained as shown in this photo. They are working hard to restore it to its former beauty.

[103] In Damascus, there are several organizations actively engaged in environmental improvement, just like these groups working in Sakki Park. Other organizations also expressed their interest in planting cherry trees together in the future.

[104]

I safely returned, and on December 27th, the Tokyo Newspaper published an article about my journey. It highlighted the encounter with Mr. Abdoula Hassan, who managed the lone cherry blossom tree that remained in Homs. Additionally, the article mentioned the expression of gratitude through a gift of jasmine seedlings from the Minister of Agriculture for the cherry saplings we planted in Syria, sent to Japan.

[105] Syria is under economic sanctions imposed by Western countries. Foreigners are seldom seen there. I've always wondered if Syrians feel like they've been forgotten by the world. While I was planting cherry trees, a bright young boy came up to me and said, "Thank you for coming to Syria," and handed me a white jasmine flower. At that moment, I felt that the Syrians were indeed happy that we came and showed an interest in them. My heart warmed up.

There are people working on beautifying the environment, and I felt that by planting cherry trees together, we could encourage the people of Syria, even just a little.

[106] In a few years, cherry blossoms will start to bloom in Syria. From that time on, I hope to initiate even a small cherry blossom viewing exchange. I hope that many people will show interest in this.

Thank you for listening.

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