CITY ABLOOM WITH BLOSSOMS

The 13th annual Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival begins on Tuesday and runs until April 29. It offers almost two dozen blossom-themed community events, all of which are free. This year the event is presented by Coromandel Properties and the Vancouver park board, writes *Susan Lazaruk*.

1. The history

The Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival, a non-profit society, was founded in 2005, after its founder and director Linda Poole returned home from living in Japan with her husband, who served in the Canadian Foreign Service.

She learned while in Japan of the Sakura Festivals, which celebrate that country's blossoms and "since so many of Vancouver's 40,000 cherry trees originated as gifts from Japan, creating a Vancouver festival struck me as a perfect way to express our gratitude and to celebrate the beauty and joy they bring," said Poole on the festival's website.

The first festival was launched in 2006, with the help of the Vancouver Board of Trade.

It was intended to educate the public through seasonal "cherry-themed" programs, musical performances and fine art and craft exhibitions.

In 2008, a new cherry grove was planted at VanDusen Botanical Garden, dedicated to Dr. David C. Lam, former lieutenant-governor and the festival's "blossom benefactor."

2. How blossom lovers can get involved

The festival invites participants to submit poetry, photography, art, design, craft and cuisine to honour the tree. And it also encourages the building of new international friendships and cross-cultural exchanges through the international Haiku Invitational program.

The activities expanded and blossom lovers were invited to "bike the blossoms" or walk a guided tour of festival favourites or act as cherry scouts by locating, identifying, photographing, recording and sharing their favourites.

That's led to a cherry blossom viewing map covering the 23 neighbourhoods of Vancouver, and the ornamental cherries in Vancouver, a handy guide designed to help anyone identify the dozens of different cultivars of ornamental cherries in the city.

3. This year's festival

The festival kicks off with more than 300 singers performing the festival's new official song, Vancouver Sings One Song, at an event on April 3 at Christ Church Cathedral downtown.
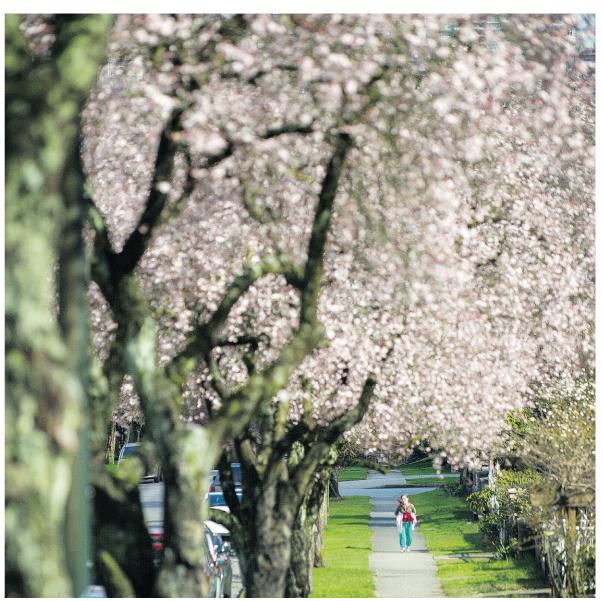
The Cherry Jam Downtown Concert happens April 5 at noon at the Burrard SkyTrain station. On April 14 and 15, the Sakura Days Japan Fair is scheduled for VanDusen Botanical Garden.

The Big Picnic is scheduled for Queen Elizabeth Park, April 14, a chance to picnic under a canopy of cherry trees.

The Sakura Night Gala at the Stanley Park Pavilion on April 22 offers Asian-fusion food prepared by Vancouver chefs. (Fundraiser for the festival.)

The festival this year is being sponsored by Coromandel Properties, a Vancouver development company, according to the festival website, and the Vancouver park board, and all the events are free.

"As a proud Chinese developer, we are honoured to support the annual Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival and its mission to actively engage different communities while sustaining and renewing Vancouver's cherry tree heritage," said Coromandel Properties principal Jerry Zhong.

Cherry blossoms as seen from Rupert and E. 3rd Ave. on Tuesday. The blooms vary year to year according to the weather. *ARLEN REDEKOP*

4. When and where is the best time to see the blossoms?

The blooms vary year to year according to the weather. The flowering plum is usually the first, in early March, and the early Whitcomb and Accolade cultivars are next, followed by the popular Akebono variety seen near the Burrard SkyTrain station in late March. The Kansan follows in early April. Check out the vcbf.com's What's Blooming Now pages.

5. What to look for

Volunteer festival "cherry scouts" have identified 54 cultivars of the ornamental cherry tree in Vancouver. They're outlined at the festival website or in the book Ornamental Cherries in Vancouver by Douglas Justice, available online or at the VanDusen Botanical Garden gift shop.