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Birdbrained Science:

A tale of two trees





Close-up of leaves from a ginko tree. Ginkgo trees are the only extant species in their lineage. PHOTO COURTESY OF @WELLINGTONGARDENSZ ON INSTAGRAM.

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Welcome to the last Birdbrained Science edition for the 2025-2026 academic year! If you haven't realized yet, my name is Gabby. I am the creator and, for the past year, the sole author of this column. As I'm graduating, you won't be getting any more Birdbrained Science from me.

But fear not! In exchange for 16 dorm-grown cherry tomatoes, I have found someone willing to carry on the column. And having personally edited his work before, I can confidently say the column is in good hands. So today, I will talk about ginkgo trees, and then my successor Colin will discuss cherry blossoms. Also, both trees originate from Asia, so happy AAPI Month!

Gabby: A little's enough

In what marks the second time I'm taking a plant-related concept I've first written about creatively and repurposing it as a column topic, I'm covering the ginkgo tree. Ginkgos, known for their distinct fan-shaped leaves, derive their name at least partly from the Chinese name , meaning "silver fruit." Despite the name, ginkgos do not actually produce proper fruit (only flowering plants do), but seeds that look like apricots. These seeds, which are used both for culinary and medicinal purposes, led to the widespread cultivation of the plant in China. From there, they made their way to Japan and Korea before eventually reaching the rest of the world, saving it from its then near-extinction.

If trees could get lonely, I think ginkgos would be some of the loneliest out there. As the only extant species in its lineage, the ginkgo has no surviving relatives in our modern day. And aside from the lack of living family, it's thought that the original ginkgo dispersers, or animals who help spread the ginkgo's seeds (usually through eating them and then defecating the seeds in new locations), have already died out. This doesn't mean ginkgo seeds don't get spread around nowadays — the seeds have been reported as being eaten by badgers — but the original dispersers are gone. Ginkgos have outlived both their family and their helpers.

As it's largely unrelated to other trees, it's no surprise that the ginkgo has some unusual characteristics. The majority of trees are monoecious, meaning that they contain both female and male parts and don't need another tree to reproduce. Ginkgos, however, are dioecious, meaning each individual ginkgo tree has a specific sex. As female trees produce smelly seeds, most trees grown for ornamental purposes are male.

Ginkgos are incredibly hardy plants. Pests don't eat their leaves, the roots tolerate poor soil conditions and the trees are even somewhat fire-resistant. Because of this, ginkgos are often grown alongside city streets. Some ginkgos were also able to survive the 1945 bombing of Hiroshima. Although the outsides of the trees were destroyed, a very small cylinder of cells deep inside the tree survived. From those clusters, the trees were able to regrow.

Ginkgos are described as "living fossils," meaning that for the past 200 million years, they have mainly remained unchanged. Despite their hardiness, if not for human involvement, the ginkgo probably would have gone extinct long ago.

So, as you wrap up the end of the semester, if you feel like you're down to just a tiny cluster of cells on the verge of extinction: Think about the ginkgo, and how many times it's been able to come back.

Sometimes a little is all you have. But sometimes, a little is enough.

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Colin: Flower Power

May I first say the cherry tomatoes were delicious. Gabby's an incredible farmer and an even more incredible columnist. (Gabby's note: I do not consider myself a farmer.)

Spring is undoubtedly in the air. All around us, flowers have begun to bloom. The sky is once again clear, and it is rightfully occupied by the many seasonal songbirds that call Connecticut home. It's hard NOT to feel joyous. Perhaps it's just the sudden restoration of my vitamin D levels, but I can confidently say that our grass has never looked so green.

Yet among the many cynthias, tulips and roses that have begun to emerge from their buds, one flower has stood out: our cherry blossoms. Just this weekend, UConn's Japanese Student Association hosted the Cherry Blossom Festival, where it celebrated the coming of spring and the blooming of these beautiful blossoms.

Halfway across the world, Japan is gearing up for its own cherry blossom celebration, known as Hanami. In Japan, the celebration of Hanami has been a part of daily life for more than a millennium, where it has been celebrated in haiku and depicted in paintings. In Japan, the celebration of Hanami has been a part of daily life for more than a millennium, where it has been celebrated in haiku, depicted in paintings and meticulously recorded in court diaries and chronicles. Even today, the tradition carries on, marked by bento picnics under the trees and late-night parties.

So important have these festivals been that for 1,200 years, a collection of monks, scribes, bureaucrats and noblemen meticulously recorded the blooming dates of the cherry blossoms in Japan's ancient capital, Kyoto. Over the centuries, these chroniclers tracked the cycle of each blossom — with a level of detail rarely seen in historical data collection. So dedicated were these citizen scientists that they included exactly whether the trees were just starting to flower, whether they were in peak bloom or if they were already beginning to scatter their petals.

For a long time, this data sat unused and uncollected, gaining dust. That was until one dedicated scientist, the late Yasuyuki Aono, compiled these many historical records to track bloom cycles through history. The result was astonishing. Aono's data showed that, for roughly 1,000 years, cherry blossoms tended to bloom around mid-April, with fluctuations in response to natural climate variations. This natural ebb-and-flow, however, was interrupted in the 1820s, when cherry trees began to bloom earlier.

This seasonal incongruity aligned with Kyoto's entry into the industrial revolution when it began releasing planet-warming gases into the atmosphere. These greenhouse gasses caused the cherry trees to trigger their blossoms earlier in response to warmer winters. The cherry tree's many chroniclers had incidentally created one of the world's longest-living records of climate change, giving still more indisputable proof of our changing world — a story of real flower power.

That's all from me, folks. See you next year!



View of a boat in the water at the Sankeien Garden in Yokohama, Japan. They are known for its seasonal scenery of cherry blossoms in the Spring. PHOTO OF @JAPANGUIDE-COM ON INSTAGRAM