


 CHERRY BLOSSOM FESTIVAL 2012


MLK Memorial fits in with its surroundings

BY MICHAEL E. RUANE

Years ago, when chief landscape architect Sheila A. Brady went to scout the site of the future Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial, the location told her immediately what to plant: Yoshino Japanese cherry trees.

The four-acre, landscaped memorial was to be set in the most historic belt of Yoshino flowering cherry trees in the nation, and Brady could see that the memorial would become a big part of the cherry blossoms. The message was clear.

This month, as Washington celebrates the centennial of the first cherry tree planting on the Tidal Basin, the King memorial has been integrated physically and emotionally into a fresh circle of history and beauty, its creators said.

And the pristine, 30-foot-tall granite statue of King on the northwest shore of the basin — appearing officially for its first National Cherry Blossom Festival — creates a striking new landscape, the National Park Service said.

It is the first such site amid the Tidal Basin's cherry blossoms since the Franklin D. Roosevelt Memorial was dedicated 15 years ago and the first to tower over the basin since the Jefferson Memorial was dedicated in 1943.

The King Memorial opened last summer and was dedicated last fall. The Park Service predicted this week that the trees should start to bloom around March 20, and peak between March 24 and 28.

The expanded festival runs from

March 20 to April 27 and this year honors the 100th anniversary of the first planting on March 27, 1912. The original trees were a gift to Washington from Tokyo.

"The juxtapositions of the cherry trees ... to the King Memorial was not a happenstance," the memorial's executive architect, Ed Jackson Jr., said in a statement.

"The significance of the floral bouquet of cherry blossoms in the early spring is one of rebirth, of commitment to the ideas and ideals of Dr. King's vision of America and the American Dream," he said.

In addition, April 4, the date of King's assassination in 1968, is the average date of the blossoms' peak blooms.

The memorial had to remove a handful of cherry trees in the construction process, said Brady, the landscape architect of record, who works for the Washington firm Oehme, van Sweden and Associates.

But the project added 182 new Yoshinos and adjusted the walkway from the basin to the memorial to avoid harming several gnarled old cherry trees nearby, Brady said.

As a result, the crescent-shaped memorial is "in congress with all of the cherries," she said last week. "It just feels like it belongs. It's very fitted to its context, to its historic context."

"My thinking here was that the cherries were the right material," she said. "It just seemed to be the right thing to do. You can imagine ... what if this were all hollies in here? ... You would have a very



BILL O'LEARY/THE WASHINGTON POST

Sheila A. Brady, chief landscape architect for the MLK Memorial, walks among the older cherry trees along the Tidal Basin. Her design not only integrates the memorial's grounds into the existing ring of trees; it adds 182 new Yoshinos to the grove.

different sensation."

Brady pointed out that the memorial is "primarily a landscaped memorial, versus an architectural memorial. . . . You're surrounded in four acres of gardens."

Planted there, along with the cherry trees, are winter jasmine, dwarf sweet-spire and Siberian iris, as well as crape myrtles, daylilies and Princeton elms.

The scene "presents a whole new vista," said Robert DeFeo, the National Park Service horticulturist and Washington's reigning government cherry blossom expert.

The new cherry trees are slightly older than the average newly planted cherry tree, DeFeo said, because officials did not want the site to look "just planted."

"They want the memorial to have a little bit of a mature appearance and a little larger tree," he said in an interview there last week.

He said they new trees — which are American-grown — will blossom three or four days behind the older trees because

of the stress of being transplanted. But the difference won't be that notable.

The Tidal Basin cherry trees are now joined by national icons on four sides — the King Memorial, the Jefferson Memorial, the Washington Monument and the Roosevelt Memorial.

But the dialog, moderated by the elegant white blossoms, between King, who stands with folded arms, and Thomas Jefferson, who was a slaveholder, is striking, Brady said. "Why is [King] looking over like that?" she said. "And why is his stance like that? . . . When children look up and say, 'Who is he? And who is he looking at over there?' Those are wonderful questions. And our history has a lot to do with that back and forth."

And the presence of the King Memorial now in the "sacred ground" of Washington's monumental core "is what's most compelling to me," she said.

"It says a lot to our country [about] the importance of having Dr. King here."

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BY MADI FLINN, 10, BURKE

Sunday in KidsPost

A special section celebrates the cherry tree anniversary with art created by Washington area kids on the meaning of the blossoms. Plus books, activities and games related to the festival.