Japan is a country made up of more than 3,000 islands located off the eastern coast of Asia in the Pacific Ocean. It is the 10th most populated country in the world with a population of over 127 million people (2006). Since most Japanese people live on the five main islands (Hokkaido, Honshu, Kyushu, Shikoku, and Okinawa), many people are living in a small amount of space. Almost half of the population, or about 63 million people, live in just three cities: Tokyo (tōˈkē-ō), Osaka (oʊˈsā-kā), and Nagoya (nuh-go-uh).

Tokyo, Japan’s largest city, has a population of over 12 million people (2003). Compare that to New York City, the largest city in the United States, with a population of 8.2 million people (2005).

Because most of the population lives in crowded cities, that greatly affects daily life in Japan. Many Japanese people live in high-rise apartment buildings or small houses. Their living space is small but expensive because of the demand for housing and the limited amount of land. Japan has one of the world’s largest economies, but because the country has few natural resources, it has to import nearly half of its food supply. That makes some food expensive to buy. The prices of housing and food make the cost of living in Japan very expensive.

Japan is known as the Land of the Rising Sun because the Japanese people once believed that each day the first rays of sun fell on Japan. Their national flag still bears the symbol of the rising sun in a cloudless sky.

Because Japan has an emperor, many people are surprised to learn that Japan is a democratic nation governed by a prime minister and parliament. The emperor is the ceremonial head of the Japanese Imperial Family, but he has no governing power. According to Japanese Shinto religious beliefs, the emperors were descendants of the sun goddess Amaterasu (ā mā tā rāa soo).

The Japanese native religion of Shinto, or the way of the gods, is deeply rooted in ancient mythology. The Shinto religion believes everything in nature has a spirit or soul. The Shinto principles of ancestor worship, ritual purity, and respect for nature’s beauty are part of Japanese culture. Many Japanese practice Buddhism combined with Buddhism.

Buddhists believe they must follow the right path in life. By practicing right thinking, right actions, right effort, right concentration, right speech, right understanding, and right livelihood, they can reach the ultimate goal of enlightenment—a state of spiritual and religious understanding. This belief greatly influences how the Japanese interact with other people and nature.

The Japanese people are a group-oriented society. They believe that loyalty to the group and their superiors is more important than personal feelings. In school, sports, or business, they place the team’s interests above their own. They also value honor, courage, and cooperation. When greeting others they show respect and honor by bowing to each other.
Through the centuries, China had a great influence on Japanese culture. Because of this influence, Japanese and Chinese culture and values are similar. The Chinese and Japanese cultures value social harmony and believe the family is the foundation of a harmonious, orderly society. Because of these values, the Japanese people work to be generous, trustworthy, humble, and brave.

Japanese people believe that there is a natural order to relationships, depending on the age, gender, education, employment, and social position of each person. When a person knows his/her social position in society, how to carry out his/her responsibilities, and how to behave appropriately, this creates harmony in relationships and society. For example, a young person in Japan honors and respects teachers because of their education, knowledge, and positions of authority. This natural order of relationships between teachers and students helps students focus on learning and eliminates conflicts or behavior problems in the classroom.

Even though they value a peaceful society, the Japanese people enjoy competition. While these seem like conflicting values, the Japanese easily apply them to daily life. For example, they work hard to compete and win as a team, yet they are not competitive with the other members on the team. Most Japanese try to avoid conflicts in relationships.

Japanese people practice discipline and self-control for the sake of a team, family, or work. Self-discipline gives them pride in making the team better, a sense of belonging to the group, and social status. Children begin to practice self-discipline early in life. For example, in some Japanese elementary schools, students reflect on their behavior at the end of the school day to see what honor they have brought to the team (class) or if they did anything that is disgraceful to the team. Through daily reflection on their behavior, students learn to correct any behavior problems they have and/or improve their attitudes. That could be a good practice for all students, no matter where they live.

References:


FACTS

**Official Name:**
Japan, Nihon

**Capital:**
Tokyo

**Official Language:**
Japanese

**Government:**
Constitutional monarchy

**Major Religions:**
Buddhism and Shinto

**National Foundation Day:**
February 11

**Area:**
377,835 sq km

**Population:**
127,463,611 (2006)

**Population Growth Rate:**
0.02% (2006)

**Currency:**
Yen (JPY)

**Wonders:**
Mount Fuji

**Health:**
Low rates of obesity

“*The sky without clouds and the sun without rays*”
Life Skill:
Diversity—demonstrate awareness of diversity; recognize value of diversity

Asian Value:
Self-cultivation—pursue spiritual depth

Pillar of Character:
Respect—treat others with respect

Success Indicator:
Youth will share ways that they enjoy nature or celebrate the change in seasons.

Materials:
None
What is your favorite part of springtime? In Japan, as springtime approaches, the people eagerly wait for the cherry trees to blossom. They even have daily reports on the news about when the cherry trees are expected to bloom. Flowering trees may seem like a small part of spring to some, but to the Japanese people, cherry blossoms have special meaning.

The cherry blossom, called sakura (sáh koo rá), is the national flower of Japan. The pale, beautiful cherry blossoms only last a short time, about a week to 10 days. To the Japanese, the cherry blossoms are a symbol of the beginning of nature’s growing season. Spring is the beginning of a new year. In fact, it is during this time that a new school year begins. Imagine starting a new year of school in April!

For centuries, the Japanese have gathered to celebrate the brief appearance of their favorite flower. As the season approaches, the Japanese people eagerly look forward to spring and plan cherry blossom viewing parties called hanami (hah nah mee). As the cherry blossoms begin to bloom, groups of people gather in parks around a cherry tree and enjoy a celebration with eating, drinking, dancing, and singing. The celebrations may last into the night because the cherry blossoms are especially beautiful against the dark sky.

Enjoying and appreciating nature and its beauty is an important part of the Japanese culture. The sakura celebrations help the Japanese people reconnect to nature and enjoy the short-lived beauty of the cherry blossoms. Because the cherry blossoms are valued for their beauty, the flowers are frequently used in Japanese art and decorations.

Do you know one of the most famous places for viewing cherry blossoms in the United States? That is in our nation’s capitol, Washington, DC. Early in the 20th century, the government of Japan presented hundreds of cherry trees to the United States as a symbol of good will between the countries. Every spring, millions of people flock to see the famous cherry blossoms. Have any of you seen the cherry blossoms in Washington, DC? You may have seen them on a visit with your family, but we often see them in magazines or on the news because they are so beautiful.

Do we have cherry trees that bloom here where we live? What other flowers and trees bloom in the spring? Why do we enjoy those flowers so much? The flowers are one of the first signs that the cold, dark winter is over and a new year of growth is beginning. It’s a time to enjoy nature. What else do you enjoy about spring? Do we have any holidays in the United States that celebrate spring? What are they, and how do we celebrate the holiday? Are they like the hanami celebration in any way?
Preparation:

Read prelude and be prepared to lead discussion with youth.

- Present the information in the Prelude through interactive discussion.
- After the discussion about different ways we celebrate spring, ask the youth to share a way that they celebrate the season or enjoy nature during spring. They can draw a picture, write a short report, make a small poster, gather natural items from the environment, etc.
- Ask youth to share their celebrations or ways they enjoy nature. Youth can share in small groups or with the whole group depending on available time and number of youth.
- Discuss Reflection Questions.
Reflection Questions

Share what you did:
- Did you enjoy learning about sakura and hanami? Why?
- What holidays do we have to celebrate spring?

Process what’s important:
- Why are sakura celebrations important in Japanese culture?
- Why are spring celebrations important to you?

Generalize to your life:
- Why is it important to learn about the celebrations of other cultures?
- How can you share your celebrations with others to help them learn more about you?
- What are ways you can enjoy nature?

Apply what you learned:
- How will you use what you have learned about Japanese celebrations?
- How can you show that you respect and enjoy nature in your daily life?

Value Connection (to reinforce the content and the values highlighted in the lesson):
In our culture, we don’t always stop to enjoy the nature that surrounds us. Too often we go from our air-conditioned (or heated) homes to our air-conditioned (or heated) vehicles without enjoying the warmth of the sun on our faces. When our ears are plugged with earphones, we don’t hear the birds singing on a warm spring afternoon or listen for the sounds of crickets and katydids on a summer’s night. With our eyes focused on video screens, we may not see the wildlife that lives in our neighborhood. Through our study of the Japanese culture, we learn to respect others whose beliefs may be different from our own, and we learn to appreciate and enjoy the simple beauty of nature.

More Challenges:
- Youth work in small groups to plan a celebration for the current season. Youth should plan the celebration around what is happening in nature during the current season.

References: