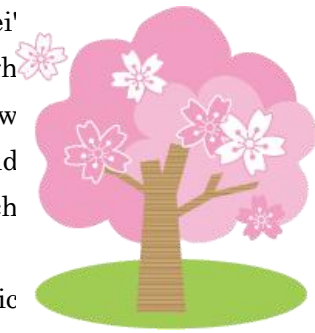


## The Nursemaid Cherry Tree

About three hundred years ago, there lived a rich man called 'Tokubei' in the Province of Iyo (Ehime Prefecture), who was a person of high moral character. Though he was blessed in everything, he didn't know the pleasure of being a father even in his life of forty years. So he and his wife often visited the 'Saihoji Temple', to pray the God of Fire which had a miraculous power.



The couple's wish was granted and his wife gave birth to an angelic daughter, who was named 'Otsuyu'. As her mother didn't have enough milk, a nursemaid called 'Osode' was hired for the baby.

Otsuyu grew up to be a pretty girl, but at the age of fifteen, she got seriously ill, and her doctors had given up on her. Osode loved Otsuyu so much that she felt as if she were her own daughter. She visited Saihoji Temple to pray to the God of Fire for Otsuyu's recovery for 21 days without missing a day. The last day of her prayer, Otsuyu suddenly got well.

Tokubei invited all of his acquaintances and gave a banquet to celebrate his daughter's complete recovery. His house was full of great joy. However when the banquet was about to finish, the nursemaid suddenly fell ill. A doctor was sent to see her the next morning. He said to Tokubei that the nursemaid would die within a few days.

Tokubei and his family were extremely sad and gathered around her bed to say goodbye.

She said to them, "It is the time I must tell you the secret. To fulfill my prayer, I asked the God of Fire to make me die instead of Otsuyu. My wish was granted. So you don't have to grieve for my death. One thing I have a favor of you. I promised the God of Fire to plant a cherry tree in the precincts of Saihoji Temple to give my gratitude to him. I haven't been able to do that by myself. So instead of me, I'll ask you to accomplish my promise... Remember, .... I'm so happy to die for Otsuyu."

After her funeral, Tokubei found one of the best cherry trees and had it planted in the precincts of Saihoji Temple. The tree grew tall with many branches. The next year, on February 16<sup>th</sup> (it was April 4<sup>th</sup> in the solar calendar), the anniversary of her death, they saw wonderful cherry blossoms. It had bloomed on February 16<sup>th</sup> every year for 254 years. The blossoms were pink and white, as if they were nipples bathed with the mother milk. They called it 'The Nursemaid Cherry Tree.'  
(2015/04/01 With Itaya)

## 乳母桜

今から三百年ほど前、伊予の国（愛媛県）に、善行を積んだ人物で、徳兵衛という富豪が住んでいました。徳兵衛は何不自由ない暮らしをしておりましたが、四十を過ぎても、まだ父親としての喜びを味わったことがありませんでした。徳兵衛と妻は足しげく西法寺を訪れては、霊験あらたかな不動明王に願いをかけました。

夫婦の願いは聞き入れられ、愛らしい娘を授かったので、お露と名付けました。しかし母親の乳の出がよくなかったので、お袖という乳母を雇いました。



お露は美しい少女に育ちましたが、十五の時、医者もさじを投げてしまうような重い病を患いました。お露をわが子のように愛していたお袖は、西法寺に二十一日の間、一日も欠かさず通っては、お露の快癒を不動明王に祈りました。その満願の日、お露はみるみる元気になりました。

徳兵衛は、知人（ちじん）を招いて、娘の全快を祝う宴（うたげ）を催しました。

家中が大きな喜びに溢れていました。ところが、宴が終わろうとする頃、お袖の具合が突然悪くなりました。翌朝呼ばれた医者に、「二、三日の命でしょう」、と告げられました。

徳兵衛とその家族は甚（いた）く悲しみ、お袖に別れを告げるために病床に集まりました。

「私の秘密を明かす時が来ました。実は、私をお嬢様の身代わりにしてください、と不動明王に願いをかけました。そして願いは聞き入れられました。ですから私の死を決して哀しまないで下さい。ただ一つお願いがあります。不動明王への感謝のしるしとして西法寺の境内に桜の木を一本植えると約束しましたが、もう自分では植えることができません。どうか私に替わって、約束を果たしてくれるようお願い・・・忘れないで・・・お嬢さまのために死ねて私はとても幸せです。」

お袖の葬式がすむと、徳兵衛は見事な桜を見つけ、西法寺の境内に植えてもらいました。桜の木は大きくなり、枝がたくさん出て葉が茂りました。翌年の二月十六日（新暦四月四日）のお袖の命日に、見事な桜の花が咲きました。その木は254年の間、毎年お袖の命日に開花するのです。その花は桃色と白の、まるで母乳で濡れた乳首のようでしたので、「乳母桜」と呼ばれました。（kudos）