

桜葉塩漬け *Sakuraba Shio-zuké* Salt-Cured Cherry Leaves



You need to source fresh cherry leaves that have not been exposed to chemical sprays or other toxic substances (such as exhaust fumes from traffic on nearby highways) to make your own salt-cured leaves. The cured leaves that are available for commercial sale are grown under carefully monitored conditions. Avoid any botanicals that are sold at flower shops since they have typically been grown for display purposes, not consumption.

When salt-curing *sakura* leaves, the preferred varieties of cherry are Somei Yoshino 染井吉野 (*Prunus × yedoensis*, most often called Yoshino cherry in America) and Oshima-Zakura 大島桜 (*Prunus Wilson var. speciosa* Makino, most often called Oshima cherry in America) a cultivar that naturally thrives in Izu, Shizuoka Prefecture (south of Tokyo).

Ideally the leaves will be plucked just before they reach “maturity,” usually around May in Tokyo. Leaves that are cured commercially in Japan are grown on trees specifically cultivated and pruned for that purpose. Typically a single tree produces about 250 serrated leaves, each about 3 inches (7.5 cm) long.

To salt-cure leaves, you will need a non-reactive container; glass or enamel-lined crockware is best. To cure 50-100 leaves the ideal dimensions of the container will be 6 inches/15 cm long, 4 inches/10 cm wide and 2 inches/5 cm deep. If you will be making a larger quantity, a deeper container is needed since double the volume of brine is required to make 500-600 leaves.

1 cup brine is sufficient to cure 50-100 leaves; 2 cups brine is needed to cure 500-600 leaves. Your **BRINE** should be a **5% saline solution**: Dissolve 3 teaspoons salt in one (American sized) cup OR 250 cc water. Warm water will make salt easier to dissolve (though some salt crystals remaining is fine).

To preserve the bright green color, help tenderize the leaves and “awaken” the latent aroma (due to the presence of COUMARIN in the leaves), BRIEFLY blanch leaves, then plunge them into ice water. I find it easiest to have a small pot of water at a rolling boil on the stove with a bowl of ice water on the counter nearby. Using chopsticks (or tongs) swish the leaves (one at a time) through the boiling water before dropping them in the bowl of ice water.

Remove the blanched leaves from the ice water quickly and set out on paper towels to blot up excess moisture. I suggest you do this in batches of 10 leaves. Take each batch of 10 leaves and stack them and loosely fold them in half lengthwise. Place these in your container and pour (room temperature) brine over to cover. Cover with clear wrap or cooking parchment and apply light pressure to insure the leaves stay submerged in the brine for at least 1 hour and up to 8 hours. Transfer to a covered container and store in a cool, dark cupboard for up to 2 weeks. For longer storage, drain off excess brine and refrigerate. I find placing leaves flat in a ziploc bag (pressing out air but retaining some brine) the easiest way to store. Brined leaves don't freeze well.



KITCHEN NOTES

Somei Yoshino 染井吉野

Named after the region (currently Toshima Ward, Tokyo) where this variety was first developed, it is a cross between Oshima cherry and Edo Higan. The botanical name is *Prunus × yedoensis*. In English it is most often referred to as Yoshino cherry.

Yoshino cherry blossoms bloom before their leaf buds sprout, covering trees with clusters of pale-petaled flowers... one of the reasons they are so popular for *hanami* flower-viewing gatherings. The leaves are a vivid green and fairly tender (compared to other varieties of cherry leaves) making them the preferred varieties for salt-curing.



(left) blossoms before leaves

(right) branch of mature leaves