The Vision …

grows from a particular set of circumstances:

A perfect location – the recently-acquired Branch Brook Park Extension with Second River ravine.
The pre-eminent landscape architecture firm, the Olmsted Brothers, developing plans.
Growing popularity of oriental gardens and cherry trees throughout the country – the trees in the nation’s capital have matured to create a beautiful scene.
Caroline Bamberger Fuld, having seen the cherry blossoms in Washington, DC offers to donate money for a display here.

But in the 1920s you could not just order up a truckload of hundreds of ornamental cherry trees. Even if they could have, the Olmsted Brothers firm and Essex County Park Commission staff were far-sighted enough to plan decades into the future.

They undertook fact-finding trips to the Arnold Arboretum in Massachusetts and to Washington, DC to learn about the different varieties of flowering cherry.

They pursued various sources for the trees, asking which would grow from seed, which could be grafted to native stock, and which were too difficult to raise themselves. Realizing there might be loss to stress and disease, they were ambitious in seeking to obtain thousands of trees that could be planted not only in Branch Brook Park, but throughout the Essex County Park System.

In 1928, Essex County Parks purchased 1,985 trees from five nurseries. The first 83 trees were planted near the tennis courts of Branch Brook Park Extension. The remaining trees were planted in the nursery space at South Mountain Reservation to grow strong until the Second River ravine area was prepared for their transplantation.
Fruit seeds rarely produce a tree or fruit the same as the parent. Park Commission contacts, more experienced in dealing with the ornamental cherry trees, suggested two varieties of cherry that would grow true to seed. Knowing it was a gamble to get fresh viable seed, the Park Commission was willing to try their luck. Below, one of the gardeners plants seeds of *Prunus incisa* from Mt. Fuji in Japan.

In January of 1929, the parks staff prepared to graft about “2,500 Japanese Cherry trees, using for the most part, scions from trees which we already have in our possession.” Essex County Parks horticulturist Carl Witte later wrote: “The grafting was done in early February and practically all of the scions have begun to sprout.”

What is Grafting?

Grafting is simply inserting a shoot (the scion) of one plant onto another (the host) so that they grow together to make a single plant.

With this popular propagation technique the scion is grafted onto a compatible rootstock, perhaps a more common variety or one known to do well in the soil and climate.

The first stage in the process is collecting the scion wood from a healthy tree. Scion wood is normally collected in late winter when pruning is done on the dormant fruit tree. Each scion requires about 3 buds.

A single scion about ½ inch in diameter grafted onto young root stock of the same size is called a whip graft. Both the scion and stock receive a slanting cut and are then matched together, bound, and covered in grafting compound.

Witte also noted that the trees purchased the year before from various nurseries were now about six feet tall. In an April letter to the Olmsted Brothers he excitedly reported on the first blossoms, their shape, color, and quantity. These small cherry trees continued to gain strength and size in the South Mountain nursery.

In the years to come, the cherry trees, along with dark green Norway spruces designed to contrast with the light blossoms, would be transplanted to the freshly-graded banks of the Branch Brook Park Extension.

Vision fulfilled!

Branch Brook Park Extension in the 1950s