

Sustainable Farming in Japan

It is extraordinary when one considers the dedication and conviction of organic farmers who grow foods that nourish not only the land, but also us and the whole agro-ecosystem, while receiving little or no recognition or support whatsoever!

In Japan just under 280,000 tons of agrochemicals were applied 2001. Statistics show it to be one of the most intensively chemically farmed countries in the world. Many reasons may contribute to this, but certainly the small parcels of individually farmed land are often sprayed individually, leading to overuse of agrochemicals. Most people prefer to grow rice by turning many small plots into one large monocropped area. Any single crop grown in this manner is more susceptible to disease and pests while also depleting the soil of nutrients. To remedy these problems, crops are sprayed with more pesticides and fungicides, with more fertilisers applied to the soil. This leads eventually to an unending destructive spiral of soil depletion. Moreover, like the rest of the world, there is very little support for alternatives but plenty of support and promotion for chemicals.

Certified organically farmed land worldwide in 2002 accounted for 17 million acres. Japan has officially no more than forty square kilometres, with less than 0.5 percent of food grown here being organic. I feel however that the actual figure is certainly higher for Japan when you consider the farms that are not officially certified, as we will see. Despite low production figures, interest in organics is very strong here, and of the \$24 billion in worldwide sales of organic, sales to Japan accounted for around \$3 billion and still growing. Japan is seen as one of the markets with the most promise and potential. With so much organic produce coming into the country many people are starting to ask questions: "Why isn't more being done to promote sustainable agriculture and to address this huge imbalance?" But in terms of this imbalance Japan is not alone, with a worldwide bias in favour of conventional farming. Of the \$313 billion given in subsidies to farmers worldwide, only 2 percent goes to sustainable agriculture.

Japan in some ways reminds me of where North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand were twenty - thirty years ago. There are many grass root organisations with just a few members supporting just a single organic farmer or two but at the same time Japan is a nation very much along the road with an established organic movement with the some food coops memberships as high as 80,000, supporting all levels of sustainable agriculture. Organic sustainable agriculture is far from new to Japan. If you go back to the last century you find Masanobu Fukuoka of the One Straw Revolution fame and Mokichi Okada, whose two organisations 'Sekai Kyusei Kyo' and the Mokichi Okada Association 'MOA' are still very active today. Both pioneered Natural Farming movements as early as the 1930's, with their techniques still very much in use today. Fukuoka san is probably the better known of the two and his farming techniques and philosophy have certainly been more influential with organic movements overseas than here. Fukuoka felt man was destroying the power of nature rather than harnessing it and saw the ultimate goal of farming not as the growing of crops but the cultivation and perfection of man as an integral part of the spiritual whole of nature, not divorced from it. His basic farming concepts are of non-interference, of seeing all other plants, insects as part of the whole and therefore of benefit and importance. He taught a non-invasive system of non-tillage, non-weeding, non-use of animal composts or other external inputs, stating all could be met within the prescribed balanced micro-system. He pioneered the use of seed balls, which is a ball made up of various seeds held together in a clay ball and scattered around the farm, creating many small micro-ecosystems.

Fukuoka san is still farming here in Japan in Ehime Prefecture, teaching and lecturing worldwide, and has been involved in a re-greening desert project in China. We sell his mikan oranges every winter. His work has been carried on by Yoshikazu Kawaguchi who teaches in the Nara, Mie and Osaka area and who still farms on his family's land in Nara with the same basic fundamental philosophy with a few adaptations of his own.

We ourselves work directly with three farmers in Gifu, and indirectly with many others, and they grow a variety of organic produce for us and others.

Nishibu san, who apart from supplying us in part with our organic vegetable boxes, also supplies around seventy families in the immediate area with organic vegetable boxes. This is similar to the CSA scheme in the States and the vegetable box scheme in Britain. He has been farming organically for twenty one years or more to Mokichi Okada methods. He farms by manual labour, having no farm machinery, and only composts organic matter from within his farm. He supports a family of six on just over one hectare of land with an annual income of ¥2.7 million. This is not enough to meet his daily needs and he has to supplement this income by labouring on building sites in winter. This situation is not uncommon here, with more than 70 percent of farmers having to supplement their farm income through outside employment. He receives no support or subsidies from the government.

Concerning certification he told me he would like to be JAS certified but could never afford the initial costs of ¥80,000 and the yearly inspections on top. Not uncommon and the other farmers we work with have expressed the exact same sentiments. Another concern he has had to face over the last year has been cheap imported organic produce from the US under pricing him.

Fujii san farms several hectares in the mountains of Gifu and his main crops are millets, wheat, barley, rice and seasonal vegetables. Before turning to growing grains he worked on a pig farm but became very despondent with the large amount of grains used as feed, feeling it would make more sense to feed people. Resigning from the farm he knew he wanted to grow grains but didn't know what kind. Coincidentally he had heard of Yumiko Otani's Life Seed Campaign (which I will get to) promoting the return to traditional grains and so attended a talk we held where she talked about the campaign. At the talk we handed out samples of cooked millet for people to try as, apart from a few elderly people, most had never seen or eaten these grains and, if they had seen them, it was more than likely in the form of birdseed they fed their budgies. Fujii san told us later that upon trying the first mouthful he had something you could call an epiphany, or revelation, and knew at that moment that this was what he would grow. He has been farming organically now for four years using the Fukuoka san and Kawaguchi san approach to farming on land that had laid fallow for fifteen years or more. Like Nishibu san, Fujii san is hard pressed to make ends meet and has a yearly income of just ¥1 million to support a family of four. In his case his children have finished school and he is close to 90 percent self-sufficient in food with no outstanding debts. Again, no farm machinery is used and the land is worked, planted and harvested by hand. Over the last year or two Fujii san has attracted a small group of young people who wish to farm organically in his area and now it seems like a small organic community is coming together with Fujii san at the helm. He supplies the main bulk of our millets and is also involved in the Soya Bean Trust, which I will talk about shortly.

Kaneyama san, not unlike Fujii san, became disillusioned with farming and turned to growing grains, sorghum and other millets for us four years ago. He has to supplement his income by working in the ski fields in the winter and he repairs farm machinery for resale. He supports a young family of five, from the ages of one to ten.

Mirai shoku or "Future Food" is a movement that was started by one woman, Yumiko Otani, around fifteen years ago to promote a return of the various types of traditional millets once grown here. Her premise has been, and still is, that by growing these grains organically and making them central to a plant based diet the ecological balance of the Earth can be maintained and will enable us to live in GAI A harmoniously.

In many mountainous areas of Japan these grains constituted a major part of the diet, with rice not playing a major role until after the 2nd World War. Millets were slowly displaced and they inevitably declined as the preference of farmers for growing rice as a staple spread and rice was increasingly consumed by the general populace. Fortunately the grains have continued to be grown in small amounts in some mountain areas. Yumiko, who organically farms these grains herself, decided to try to reverse this decline by promoting their use through cooking classes and talks to re-educate people in their use as healthy nutritious replacements for animal protein and encourage a return to the traditional grain based diet. The first classes and lectures were very poorly attended with often only one or two people coming. No matter, this didn't deter her and eventually her message about these exceptionally nutritious grains started to reach people.

One major problem, however, soon became apparent. Namely that, while the promotion for the use of grains in various recipes was at last receiving attention, it was discovered that not nearly enough of these grains were being grown locally to meet the increasing demand! All that was available was imported grains, and these grains were imported as bird feed! In response to this, the *'The Life Seed Campaign'* was launched, with lectures given nationwide. Farmers were especially invited and given free seed in the hope of getting them interested in growing these grains. This was followed by smaller meetings to offer support and advice to the farmers and individuals who had responded, and as a medium to share and exchange ideas and discuss the various difficulties they were experiencing.

The campaign has been very successful, with various farmers' co-ops and even prefectural governments are now involved and supporting the campaign. It has even gone international to support similar projects in India and South America. Yumiko has written several books ranging from growing to cooking millets and is one of the leading figures here on health and sustainable agriculture. The work continues nationwide to support individuals who wish to make the transition back to the traditional diet and farmers who wish to grow these exceptional grains.

'The Soya Bean Trust' is another very positive movement started in the Tokai region by Yuri Atsuko several years ago as an answer to the pollution caused by the land based runoff flowing into the Kiso river that passes through Gifu into Aichi. Atsuko found that most of the chemical pollutants stemmed from conventional agriculture practices along its bank. She decided this could be limited or even stopped if farmers grew organically. She approached several farmers who farmed along its banks with the help of her own organisation *'Kurashi O Tagayasukai'* (Tilling for Life) and asked the help of the small farming organisation called *'Yuki Heart Net'* to participate in the growing the organic soya beans. The whole emphasis was to guarantee the farmers that they would be paid even if their crops failed - a dream come true for them - on the condition they farmed organically. The funds were raised through several organisations but mainly Kurashi O Tagayasukai, which asked its members to pre-pay ¥2000 to support this project in return for receiving up to 2 kg or more after the harvest. They needed 500 people to pledge ¥2000 to get the trust up and running.

The scheme has been an amazing success due in part to the awareness of the dangers of agrochemicals but even more so due to the concerns about GMO soya beans. Japan imports on average 70-75 percent of its food, and soya beans imports account for 97-98 percent of all soya used in here. In response to GMO concerns, domestic soya bean production jumped 2 percent to about 5 percent thanks to projects like the *'Soya Bean Trust'* Tokai and other trust projects around Japan. Sadly, Atsuko was killed in a motor accident in August 2002 with two members of her immediate family, returning home for the Obon holidays.

It is a privilege to know and work with such positive movements and individuals. I have immense respect for the farmers I work with who apply the most environmentally sustainable farming practises that I have yet to come across. I count them as friends, rarity in this global driven economy where very few even know the country of origin of the food they eat let alone the people who grew it. None can afford certification but their word is as true and honest as their methods of farming and produce. It is uplifting to know that they are such enlightened and dedicated people, who may one day receive the recognition they deserve, no longer been seen a cranks in their respected communities, but be heralded as the true visionaries and stewards of the land in every sense of the word.

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