

The New Appeal of Agriculture

Farming in Japan today faces many difficulties, especially the decrease and aging of the farming population and the decrease in agricultural output. Recently, however, vigorous efforts are being made all over the country to overcome such problems, reinvent agriculture, and develop new approaches to farming.

Also more people have developed an interest not only in the state of agriculture and also in farming themselves. In this issue we report on recent topics in Japanese agriculture.

 This mark indicates that more related information is included on the "Click Japan" website. <http://www.tjf.or.jp/clicknippon/>

What's Up in Agriculture

From about the mid-1950s, Japan rapidly industrialized and its farming population steadily decreased. The average age of those who continued to be engaged in agriculture rose steadily, and land left idle for lack of younger people to inherit the farms was increasing. With globalization of the world economy, meanwhile, imports of cheap farm produce from overseas have led to the continued decrease in domestic agricultural output.

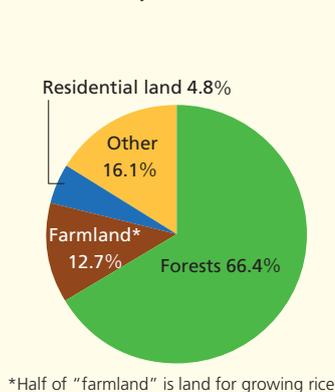
Not surprisingly, Japan's food self-sufficiency has fallen to about 40 percent, a markedly low figure compared to other nations. The weakened state of agriculture has been attributed in part to what many consider the failure of agricultural policies. After World War II, the government made strenuous efforts to protect the domestic production of rice, the staple of the Japanese diet, by controlling the price of rice and the amount of rice produced as well as imposing high tariffs on imported rice. Ultimately, however, these policies undermined the competitiveness of the agricultural industry as a whole. Today, much discussion and debate is going on about what can be done for the betterment of the agricultural industry.

Admirable agriculture

Until recently, the general image of agriculture had little going for it. Farming was associated with the six Ks: *kitsui* きつい (hard), *kitanai* 汚い (dirty), *kakko warui* かつこ悪い (uncool), *kusai* くさい (smelly), *kasegenai* 稼げない (unprofitable), and *kek-kon dekinai* 結婚できない (can't find a spouse). Determined to do away with that image, a Nagano prefecture farmer named Ogiwara Masachika founded the magazine *Agrizm* in 2009. The pages of the magazine portray people who enjoy and find fulfillment in farming and transmit the admirable aspects of agriculture. Also founded in 2009 was the non-profit organization Noka no Kosegare Network (lit., network of farmers' offspring), which organizes various kinds of seminars and workshops to provide support for farming households. The director of the network, Miyaji Yusuke has made it his goal to transform the image of farming from the old and unappealing six Ks to what he calls the new three Ks: *kakko ii* かつこいい (cool; admirable), *kando ga aru* 感動がある (inspiring), and *kasegeru* 稼げる (profitable).

Japanese Agriculture in Figures

Land use in Japan



Source: Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism

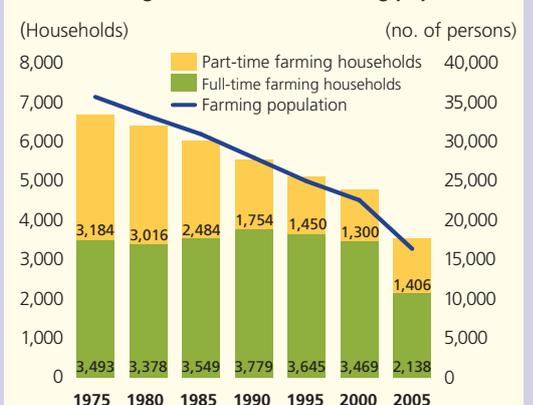
International Comparison of Farm Size per Household

	Farmland area per farming household
Japan	1.8 ha
US	180.2 ha
EU	16.9 ha
Australia	3,423.8 ha

Sources: Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries data for Japan from a 2006 survey on trends in the structure of the agriculture industry; for the United States from Department of Agriculture documents for 2005; for Europe from European Commission documents for 2005, and for Australia from Australian Bureau of Agriculture and Resource Economics documents for 2004.

Note: Figures for Japan are for area of arable and cultivated fields per number of farms that either cultivate land of 30 acres or over or sell produce worth 500,000 yen or more.

No. of farming households and farming population



Source: "Agricultural Census," Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries.

Q: What features do you notice based on these figures?



Look for data about food self-sufficiency and food imports here.

New recruits to farming

In the last few years, young people starting up new farms has been on the increase, among them many who do not come from farm family backgrounds. This trend is partially due to changing images of farming and to the prolonged recession in which agriculture has become a career alternative, but perhaps even more because of deregulation, which has led to the startup of many new legally incorporated farming enterprises. Now those who want to work in farming but do not have sufficient capital or technical know-how to start independently can more easily find employment in an already established agribusiness. Individuals with ideas for starting new businesses in agriculture and companies seeking to advance into agriculture-related fields are also on the rise.



Direct Links Between Farmers and Consumers

The produce farmers raise ordinarily passes through various hands before it reaches consumers: farmers take their harvests to a local cooperative and the cooperative ships the produce to wholesale markets from which retail grocers and supermarkets stock their shelves. Although this system frees farmers from having to worry about finding sales routes and dealing with customers, the more middlemen there are, the lower the return on their labors. Another drawback is that a great deal of produce that does not conform to cooperative and wholesalers' standards (so-called "irregular" vegetables) ends up being dumped. A further drawback, from the viewpoint of the consumer, is that obtaining really fresh vegetables can be difficult.

To remedy these problems, various initiatives including internet sales to enable delivery of farm produce directly to consumers have recently been launched. These new approaches not only make it possible for consumers to obtain fresh produce and increase the profit to the growers, but also, by linking consumers and growers, promote the human side of farming. Through closer links, growers will better feel the incentive to make their produce good for their customers, and consumers will feel gratitude for the efforts and know-how of the growers when they eat their vegetables.

They got started in the fall of 2009 in eight prefectures around the country with the support of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (MAFF). In Tokyo, Marché Japon markets are held once or twice a week at seven locations including Roppongi, Akasaka, and Aoyama, right in heart of the city's fashionable district. Hill's Marché in Roppongi regularly has about 30 stalls visited by more than two to three thousand customers.

At the Marché, producers can freely decide what products to sell, in what quantity, and at what price, and they can directly express their thoughts about their produce and explain its qualities to customers. Another advantage is that consumers can get across to producers information about their own needs and learn more about the producers from whom they buy, reassuring them about the safety of the foods they eat.

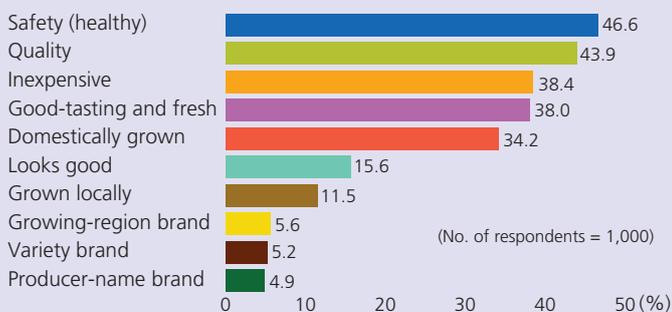


The Hill's Marché in Roppongi is held inside a large building.

"My farms" マイ農家

Another way consumers can obtain produce directly from producers is through the "My Farm" system under which they contract with specific farms to receive a regular supply of vegetables (mainly organically grown or chemical-free produce). In many cases, this system involves prepayment by the consumer, making it easy for even small-scale farms to maintain a stable business.

Most important criteria when buying vegetables and fruit



Source: "Questionnaire Survey on Next Generation Agriculture" (Nomura Research Institute, 2009).

Marché markets

Marché Japon are markets where consumers can obtain produce directly from producers in different parts of the country.

Local Consumption of Local Produce



Another recent agriculture-related trend is focused on local consumption of locally grown farm products (*chisanchisho* 地産地消). Consumers can obtain fresher products at lower prices than goods that pass through the standard distribution channels. Another advantage is in supporting the preservation of region-specific recipes and foods typical of those areas. The local-grow/local consume movement is also being promoted as a viable approach to reducing food-mileage.* Decreasing food mileage is considered to be one way of controlling the emission of greenhouse gases thought to be responsible for global warming. Japan's food mileage is high compared to other countries, and the highest in the world per capita, making reduction of food mileage an urgent task.

*Food mileage is an index determined by multiplying the weight of food by the distance it travels. The closer to the location where the food is consumed, the shorter the food mileage, the farther way, the higher the food mileage. Great amounts of CO₂ are discharged into the atmosphere from the fuel burned in the shipping of food from one place to another.



See a graph of food-mileage for some nations.

Direct sales stalls in the community

One of the easiest places to obtain local farm products is at direct sales stalls or stores (*chokubaijo* 直売所). *Chokubaijo* vary considerably in style and scale, from simple, unattended roadside stands where produce is piled up and customers pay on their honor into a cash box provided, to fixed stores built in conjunction with restaurants or other facilities. As of the 2005 MAAF Census, there

were more than 13,000 such *chokubaijo* throughout Japan, a figure even larger than the number of the nationwide stores of the country's largest convenient store chain at the time. Local governments make active use of such direct sales centers to promote tourism and hold local agricultural events aimed at stimulating the local economy.



At this *chokubaijo*, vegetables are sold in "coin lockers" that unlock when the amount indicated is inserted.

School lunches

One of the objectives set down in the Basic Plan for Promoting Nutrition established in 2006 by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology is to increase the proportion of local products used in preparing school lunches. Various reasons are cited including the preservation of the traditional food culture of the region, the invigoration of local agriculture, and the increase in local food self-sufficiency. Indeed, children who are aware that they are eating school lunches made from produce grown locally are more likely to develop understanding and appreciation for local agriculture and traditional dishes. Some local schools, in addition to using locally grown ingredients in lunches, also conduct various programs through which children can experience farm work for themselves and talk with producers.

Enjoying Farming in the City

Reflecting the growing awareness of the importance of "safe" produce—that is, coming from reliable sources—and the boom in vegetable consumption by health-conscious consumers, as well as concern with the need to reduce food mileage in Japan, the number of people who grow vegetables has increased. Many appear to be attracted by the chance to work with the soil and enjoy the satisfaction and fulfillment of growing things.

Companies that sell seedlings have developed special vegetable seedling series designed for home gardening. They highlight the added attraction of home gardening by offering seedlings of vegetables not sold in stores, such as certain European varieties of tomatoes.

Veranda gardens

Growing vegetables on the verandas of apartments or high-rise condominiums in the cities is now no longer rare. "Mini" ミニ and "baby" ベビー vegetables, which are fairly easy to grow and harvest in a short period of time, have become stock items. Home gardening companies have been developing mini and baby vegetables especially for this market. For beginners,



Vegetable-growing kit (Kodansha, 2010)

they offer pre-packaged sets consisting of seedlings along with planters, soil, fertilizer and other necessities. Plant-growing kits were put on sale even in some bookstores.

Weekend farmers

Among middle-aged and older people living in the cities, an increasing number tend gardens on weekends and in other free time from their jobs on plots rented from local landowners. In metropolitan Tokyo, plots of municipal-government-managed fields *shimin noen* 市民農園 available for local residents are so popular that they are often assigned by lottery. Particularly popular are some "rental farms" *rentaru famu* レンタルファーム where professionals provide guidance for beginners.

Some 2 million people are believed to be using such short-term rental farm plots. Some companies have sought to capitalize on this boom by converting residential land or parking lots into rental farms.

Rooftop gardens

In Tokyo, nature preservation regulations revised in 2001 make it mandatory for any building with a site area of more than 1000 square meters (250 square meters for public facilities) to incor-

Incorporating Agriculture into Education



“Agriculture School Koshien”

About 90,000 students at agricultural high schools and high school departments of agriculture are affiliated with the Federation of Japanese School Agriculture Clubs. At the national convention of these clubs, called the “Nogyo no Koshien 農業の甲子園,” (agriculture school Koshien; see 甲子園 in *Takarabako* No. 23) students studying agriculture present the results of their activities and engage in various competitions of knowledge and skills. At the 61st convention held in 2010, 341 schools and 3,200 students participated.



Students compete in farm crop inspection at the “agriculture school Koshien.” © Future Farmers of Japan

Farming for healthy children

About 80 percent of elementary school students and 30 percent of junior high school students have classes featuring rice planting and harvesting, sweet potato digging, or other kinds of farming experience. In addition to the fun of harvesting fruit or vegetables, they learn about nature and living things, and deepen their understanding of and interest in food. More than 80 percent of elementary school teachers give high marks to the educational impact of such farm-experience classes. Some elementary

porate rooftop plantings for both new and rebuilt or remodeled buildings. These regulations have encouraged the cultivation of gardens and other plantings on rooftops.

A non-profit organization called the Oedo Yasai Purojekuto, the “Great Edo Vegetable Project,” which works to promote familiarity with farming among people living in the cities, raises organic vegetables using rooftop gardens of buildings in central Tokyo. A rooftop of a building in the mammoth Roppongi Hills complex has a real rice paddy. In 2010, the complex organized a special program for the families of residents of the building to experience rice planting and harvesting. Farmland remaining in

the cities decreases each year, but rooftop gardens not only help make building rooftops green but also offer places close at hand where people can satisfy their impulse to garden.



Rice planting on a rooftop rice paddy at Roppongi Hills. © Mori Building Co., Ltd.

and junior high schools hold regular “second school” programs where students stay at local homes or lodging houses (*minshuku* 民宿) in an inland or coastal region (opposite to their home locale) for a week to engage in farming or fishing tasks.

In the city of Suzaka, Nagano prefecture, local producers, associations of the elderly, and other local groups cooperated in holding a “Nogyo Shogakko,” a school program to give children experiences of both the joys and the rigors of farming and foster their psychological resilience and creativity as well as gratitude for the food they receive. Twice a month, Saturday mornings, the children perform such farming chores as weeding fields, husking grain, and harvesting crops, experiencing all the jobs entailed in growing crops throughout the year.

Vicarious Farming Games



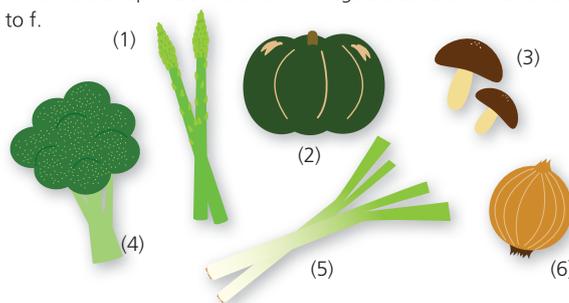
Some games available via cell phones and on the Internet provide vicarious experiences with farming. Some of those that have become popular include “Hatakeppi” and “Hokkaido Yunin-Famu—Minna de nojo purodyusu@Yunicho.” These games make it possible to actually purchase via the Internet the same vegetables as those raised as part of the games.



Read an article about more farming-related games.

Let's Try!

1. What is the Japanese word for the vegetables below. Pick one from a to f.



- (a) アスパラガス (b) ねぎ (c) ブロッコリー
(d) たまねぎ (e) しいたけ (f) かぼちゃ

2. Most of the vegetables given above are grown in Japan but import of some of them has been increasing in recent years. Guess the two countries that export to Japan the largest quantity of each of the following vegetables.

- (1) ブロッコリー (2) たまねぎ
(3) しいたけ (4) ねぎ
(5) アスパラガス (6) かぼちゃ

- (a) United States (b) China (c) Mexico
(d) New Zealand (e) Australia (f) Czechoslovakia

The answers can be found at

<http://www.tjf.or.jp/takarabako/bi02.htm>