


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.

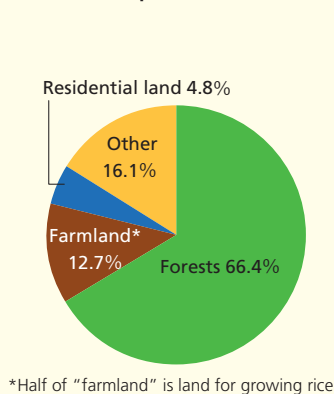
Not surprisingly, Japan's food self-sufficiency has fallen to about 40 percent, a markedly low figure compared to other nations. The weakened state of agriculture has been attributed in part to what many consider the failure of agricultural policies. After World War II, the government made strenuous 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

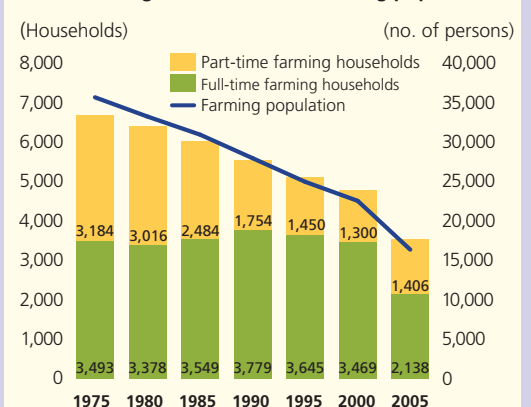
International Comparison of Farm Size per Household

| | 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.



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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.

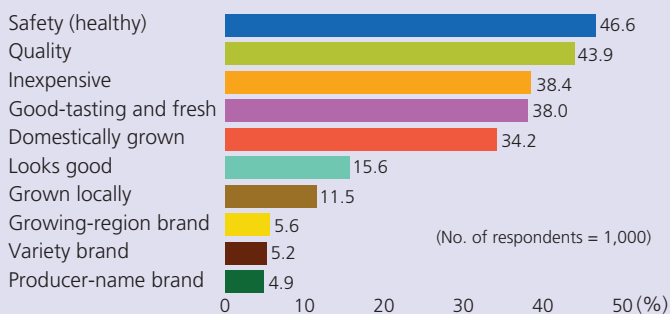
At the Marché, producers can freely decide what products to sell, in what quantity, and at what price, and they can directly express their thoughts about their produce and explain its qualities to customers. Another advantage is that consumers can get across to producers information about their own needs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



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

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.

"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.

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



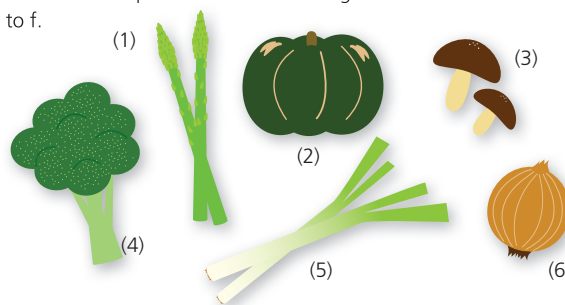
Some games available via cell phones and on the Internet provide vicarious experiences with farming. Some of those that have become popular include “Hatakeppi” and “Hokkaido Yunin-Famu—Minna de nojo purodyusu@Yunicho.” These games make it possible to actually purchase via the Internet the same vegetables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

Young Energy Is Jazzing up Farming

I am a farmer, working on a farm that has been in our family for seven generations. I am twenty-two and love *gyaru*-style makeup and dressing up, so I found out quickly that there aren't many other young women in agriculture I could freely talk to. But this is the age of the Internet, so I created an online community called "No-ing Musume" 農-ing 娘, which means "Farming Girls," to find other young women who work in agriculture in other parts of Japan and get to know them.



You can listen to Mikako's voice.

Mikako, 22, Akita prefecture

As a child, I often helped out my parents on the farm, but I had no intention of following in their footsteps. I thought I wanted to be an office worker, so after graduating from high school I went to vocational school to learn clerical skills. There I realized that I didn't really want a job where I would have to sit in an office all day long. I got into a fight with my parents, who didn't want me to quit school, and I rebelled, leaving home for a while. Eventually, my parents relented and I dropped out of that school. Even after I went back home, though, I couldn't figure out what to do with myself. I spent many idle, aimless days wondering what path I wanted to pursue.

Then my parents said, "Why don't you help out on the farm?" As a child, I was often given painstaking and rather tedious jobs to do, like sorting seeds, so I thought that farming was boring. Well, I'm a big girl now, so they let me drive a tractor and operate new machinery that we didn't have in the past. The tasks they gave me made me feel in command and challenged, and my previous impression of farming as dull and monotonous just vanished. Not only was it exciting to operate the machinery—I also discovered the joy of harvesting crops that I had planted myself. Gradually, I found myself feeling really committed to farming. And now, I grow crops like rice, long onions (*negi* ねぎ), round onions, corn, eggplant, tomatoes, green soybeans (*edamame* 枝豆), potatoes, pumpkin, bok choy (*chingensai* チンゲン菜), asparagus, cabbage, and Chinese cabbage (*hakusai* 白菜).



Mikako mastered the use of all sorts of farm machinery.

Encounters through Farming

Once I began working as a farmer, I started to meet all kinds of interesting people, and we share our daily news through our blogs and Twitter accounts. The young female farmers all over the country whom I met online are an extremely impor-

tant source of moral support. In the No-ing Musume community that we created together, we exchange information about farming or ask each other for advice through our blogs and e-mail; we also meet in person to get to know each other better. Currently, we have about twenty members. Since the majority of farmers tend to be older men, I used to feel lonely because I didn't know young women I could talk with freely or discuss problems I had on the farm. Today, I'm very happy because, thanks to the Internet, I can consult other young women of similar outlook and circumstances. Many non-farmers have also left supportive messages on my blog or visited me in person, which is very encouraging. These relationships and connections I have established with people are what I love the most about farming.

Mixed Feelings about "Trendy" Farming

The media has lately been portraying the "cool" or heroic aspects of farming, and emphasizing the way working with the land can be psychologically "healing." Media attention has also tended to focus on groups of fashionably dressed, young *gyaru* ギャル girls from Tokyo who go out to the country on weekends to "experience" farming. It is a good thing if people are getting a more positive impression of agriculture and becoming more interested in farming.

Still, some people from the city go into farming thinking it is going to solve their psychological problems, be relaxing, easy, and a release from the pressures they are under. Many seem to think that relationships between people are less complicated in farming and that one can make a living simply by growing crops.

All that is far from the reality. In summer, we work under the



Cleaning long onions (*negi*). Being a farmer involves not just work in the fields, but many painstaking and important tasks in preparing produce for market.

blazing hot sun, and the hard physical labor we perform is far from “relaxing.” There are no weekends or long holidays, and no fixed working hours. We farmers have to work with lots of other people, too, and relationships can be quite complicated. Farming is not simply a matter of growing crops; we have to think of profitable ways to sell them as well. Far from being free of anxiety, the work is often nerve-wracking. On our farm, we once hosted trainees who, influenced by the trendy image of farming, came thinking they wanted to become farmers. When they came face to face with the gap between their idealized notion of farming and the reality, all they could do was complain that the work was too hard and that they were unable to endure the lack of holidays. Eventually they gave up.

Making a living from farming is not easy or uncomplicated. I think it’s great that the media has improved the image of agriculture and that more people are becoming interested in it. However, as one who faces the serious problems and hardships of farming every day, I can’t help but feel a bit irritated by people who go into farming just because they think it will be easy.

Living with Uncertainty

Of course, even I was a bit naïve at first and often wanted to throw in the towel. When I first began farming, people left spiteful messages on my blog, disparaging the idea of a woman driving a tractor. There was even some harassment—people threw empty cans onto our property and pulled up seedlings we had planted. I’ve been farming for four years now, and at first there were many incidents that discouraged and frustrated me. I was able to continue because I felt strongly that if I quit, I would just make myself into a loser. I was also able to go on thanks to the many fine people I have met since starting this job.



Harvesting crops I planted myself makes me especially happy.

To be sure, recently my confidence is sometimes shaken because of the numerous uncertainties involved in making a living as a farmer in Japan today. For instance, due to the lack of help from young people, elderly farmers are forced to shoulder demanding physical labor themselves. As older farmers retire, there will be even fewer people to work on the farms. Cheap, imported vegetables and crops from overseas keep the value of domestic crops low. If our crops are damaged by bad weather or natural disasters, we have no income. Many farmers today lead unstable lives on very meager profits. I myself worry every day whether I will be able to make a living as a farmer in the decades ahead.

Despite the uncertainty, I plan to continue farming as long as I can. Since I started farming and have met people of all ages, I’ve begun to learn more about Japanese history, too. I have gotten interested in some of the sayings of famous people of long ago and found their words and outlook on life a big inspiration. I would like to learn more about our history and think about

what it is that young Japanese people like myself are lacking. I’m determined to go on living with this uncertainty and continue farming as best I can.

Mikako’s blog:

<http://ameblo.jp/kodamanojo>

My favorites



好きなこと What I’m into now

化粧すること。特にギャルメイクが好きです。

Wearing makeup—I especially love *gyaru*-style makeup.

好きな野菜 Favorite vegetable

玉ねぎ。食感が好きです。

Round onions. I love their crisp, succulent texture.

将来の夢 My dream

農業を通じて友だちをたくさんつくることです。

To make many more friends through farming.

農業をやっている楽しいと思うこと What I love about farming

色々な人に出会えること。

Meeting different types of people through farming.

大好きな、歴史上の偉人のことば My favorite quote

世の人は 我を何とも言わば言え 我が成す事は 我のみぞ知る
“No matter how people may criticize me, I am the only one who knows what I want to accomplish.” (Yo no hito wa / ware o nana tomo iwaba ie / wa ga nasu koto wa / ware nomi zo shiru)



Note: This article is based on an interview held in December 2010.