

HIGHLIGHTING *Japan*

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SPENDING THE SUMMER
IN JAPAN

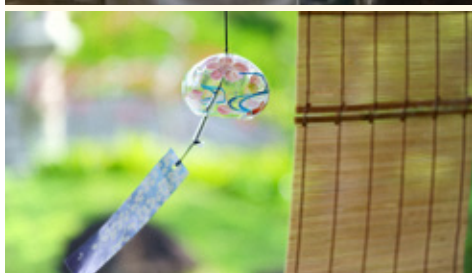
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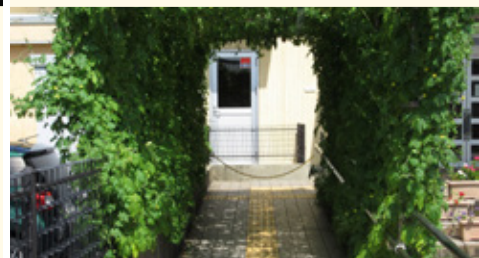
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THEME FOR **AUGUST:**

**SPENDING THE SUMMER
IN JAPAN**

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**GLOBALLY IMPORTANT AGRICULTURAL
HERITAGE SYSTEMS**

Managing Aso Grasslands for Sustainable
Agriculture

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MANAGING EDITOR Sawaji Osamu

EDITORS Alex Hendy, Chiba Hitoshi, Fujita Mao

EDITORIAL SUPPORT Kiura Eriko

CONTRIBUTORS Kato Kyoko, Sasaki Takashi, Sato Kumiko,
Umezawa Akira, Yanagisawa Miho

DESIGN Imai Mei, Okadome Hirofumi

ON THE COVER

A T-Shirt Art Exhibition at the art "museum" Irino Beach in Kuroshio Town,
Kochi Prefecture

Photo: Courtesy of Sunabi Museum

EDITORS' NOTE

Japanese names in this publication are written in Japanese order:
family name first, personal name last.

JAPAN-FRANCE SUMMIT MEETING AND LUNCHEON MEETING

ON July 24, Mr. Suga Yoshihide, Prime Minister of Japan, held a Japan-France summit meeting with H.E. Mr. Emmanuel Macron, President of the French Republic, who is visiting Japan to attend the opening ceremony of the Tokyo Olympic Games, followed by a one-on-one luncheon meeting. The overview of the meetings is as follows. On the occasion of this summit meeting, the two leaders issued a joint statement.

At the outset, Prime Minister Suga welcomed President Macron's visit to Japan for the first time in two years, and expressed his gratitude for President Macron's prompt announcement of his support for and attendance at the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games. In response, President Macron stated that yesterday's opening ceremony was wonderful and that he was confident that the Tokyo Games would be a success.

Prime Minister Suga stated that he was delighted to see the progress on concrete cooperation between Japan and France toward a free and open Indo-Pacific, including the joint exercise during the visit by the French training fleet "Jeanne d'Arc" to Japan in May of this year, and expressed his intention to continue to strengthen cooperation. In response, President Macron expressed his will to continue working closely together with Japan in the Indo-Pacific region.

Regarding bilateral economic relations, the two leaders welcomed the progress in business-to-business cooperation between Japan and France. They shared the view to deepen cooperation in areas including the environment, digital, and strengthening the resilience of supply chain through the Japan-France Industrial Cooperation Committee. Prime Minister Suga also asked for France's cooperation in removing the EU's import restrictions on Japanese food products.

The two leaders also exchanged views on cooperation concerning global issues such as climate change, biodiversity, and development in Africa. They concurred to work together to carry the achievements of the G7 Cornwall Summit in June to the G20 Summit to be held in Italy this October.

The two leaders exchanged views on responses to regional situations, including China, and concurred that Japan and France would work closely together. They also shared their serious concerns about the situation surrounding Hong Kong and the human rights situation in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.



Japan-France Summit Meeting



Japan-France luncheon meeting



Japan-France luncheon meeting



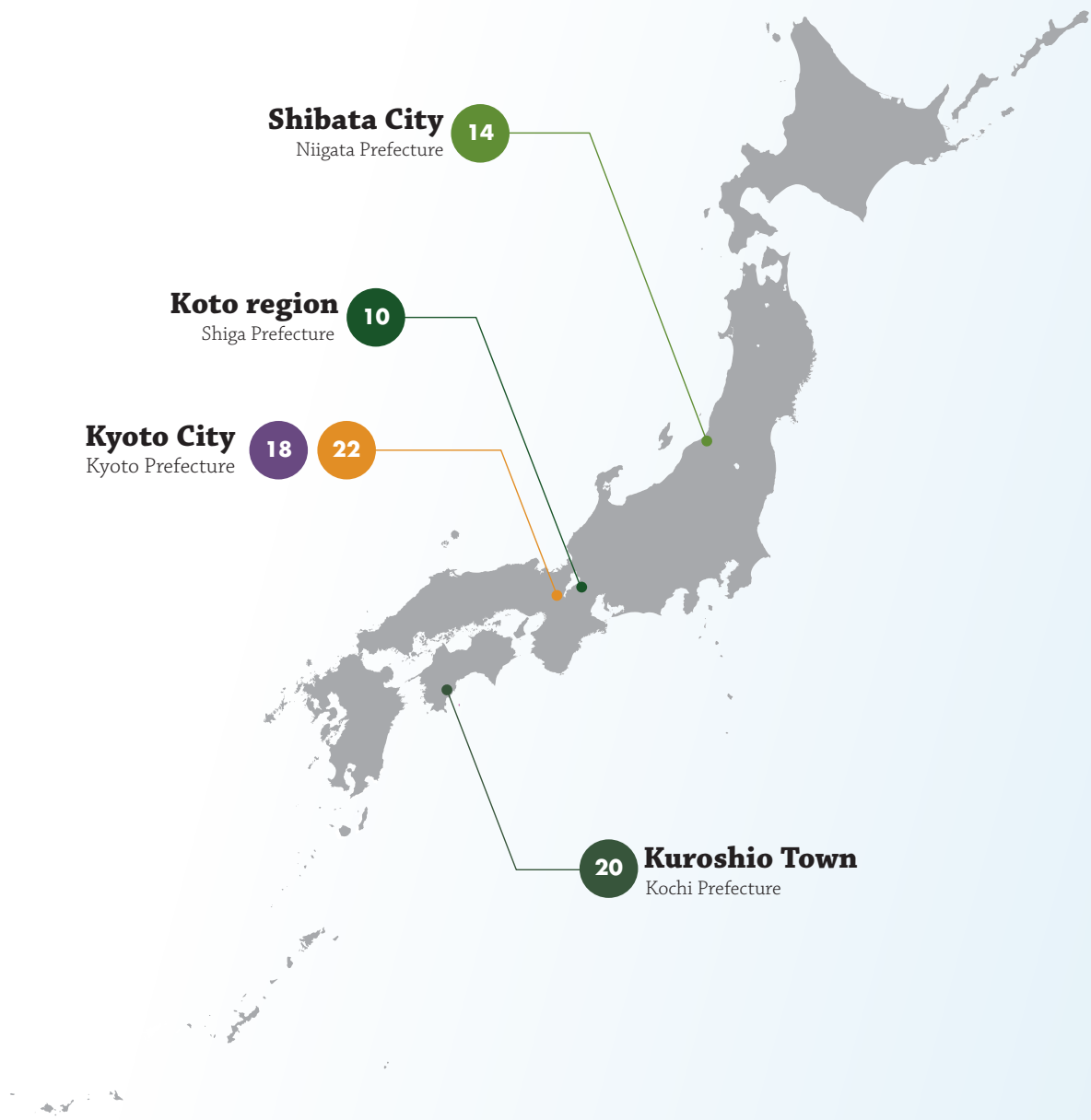
SPENDING THE SUMMER IN JAPAN



Photos: Courtesy of Miyawaki Baisen Co., Ltd.; Courtesy of Japan Kakigori Association; Courtesy of KITAMURA TOSHIFUMI

J

apanese people have devised a variety of ingenious ways to get through the hot and humid summers. This month's *Highlighting Japan* introduces some of the traditional seasonal customs that are still practiced today along with other unique features of the Japanese summer.



How to Spend a Summer in Japan



Hirota Chieko arranging flowers
Photo: Courtesy of Hirota Yukimasa

BY and large, Japanese summers are hot and humid. And since ancient times, Japanese people have devised a variety of ways to survive those hot and humid summers. We interviewed Hirota Chieko, who holds workshops in which she teaches about traditional Japanese events and seasonal decorations, regarding these unique Japanese ways of getting through the summer.

Japanese summers are extremely hot and humid. What kinds of things did Japanese people come up with in the past to get through the summers comfortably?

Back before there was air conditioning, Japanese people got creative in a variety of ways with houses, clothing, and food to cope with the severe heat. For example, they elongated the eaves on traditional Japanese homes to keep the sun from reaching deep into rooms. This made it harder for

the temperature of the room to rise. *Sudare*, screens made by weaving the stems of finely cut bamboo or reeds, were hung on the eaves. This was to block the sunlight while also maintaining air flow. Japanese people also do *uchimizu* (sprinkling water on the paths and gardens in front of their homes) to prevent dust from rising and, through the effect of vaporization, to keep the temperature from increasing.

It's my habit to often wear kimono, a type of traditional clothing, and in summer I choose kimono made from gentle-on-the-skin materials such as hemp or cotton. Kimono are highly breathable and, because they cover the entire body, they keep the skin from coming in contact with sunlight directly. Recently, *yukata*, which are simpler than ordinary kimono, are becoming popular among young people as stylish summer clothing.

Japanese people also came up with ways to feel cool through stimulating hearing, sight, taste, and other senses. For example, *furin*, wind chimes. These were originally meant to ward off evil, as people believed that bad things wouldn't happen anywhere you could hear the chimes. Over time, they came to be a feature of summer that offered a sensation of coolness. *Furin* themselves do not produce a cool breeze. Yet, hearing the sound of wind chimes swaying in the wind, we do get a sensation of coolness by using our imagination.



A *furin* wind chime and *sudare* screen
Photo: Nara Kanko/PIXTA



Tokoroten noodles dressed with soy sauce and vinegar
Photo: masa/PIXTA

What are some unique and traditional Japanese summer foods and drinks?

Since today we have refrigerators, we are now able to eat and drink everything all year round. Even so, there are certain foods that many Japanese people eat during the summer. For example, *tokoroten*, noodles made from a type of red algae, is a food that cools down a body that has become hot. The sight of the transparent noodles is refreshing, and the noodles go down so smoothly. They can be enjoyed sweet with brown sugar syrup drizzled over the top or with the refreshing flavor of soy sauce and vinegar.

For summer, I also recommend *amazake*, a sweet drink made from rice. Many Japanese people think amazake is a



Amazake rice drink
Photo: CORA/PIXTA

warm winter drink, but it is quite delicious when served chilled in summer. It is full of glucose, amino acids, and other nutrients, so has been called a “drinkable intravenous drip.” In the Edo period (early 17th to late 19th century), it was actually popular as an “energy drink” that was consumed to regain one’s strength in summer. *Biwayoto*, loquat leaf tea, was also consumed in summer at the time just like amazake. *Biwayoto* is a drink made by mixing and brewing loquat leaves with cinnamon and other leaves, and it is also said to aid recovery from fatigue. We don’t see it anymore, but itinerant merchants selling amazake and loquat leaf tea were a typical summer sight during the Edo period.

Tell us about some traditional Japanese summer events.

The precise date differs by region, but the Obon festival takes place in the middle of July or August. Obon is a festival held once a year where the spirits of ancestors are welcomed back to this world, entertained, and then sent off again. There are many Obon festival practices, differing by region and household. It has become rare to do this in cities in recent times, but for example, a fire is lit in front of the gates to each house as a guide to keep the spirits from getting lost. And inside the house, decorative vehicles for the spirits to ride made from materials such as seasonal vegetables are displayed. For these vehicles, cucumbers are often made into horses to have an ancestor’s spirit return quickly while eggplants are often made into cows so the spirits can return slowly. During the Obon season, *bon-odori* dances are held in each region and people dance to the music by forming circles or walking in formation down the street. The dances have become entertainment today, but originally they were



During Obon, “horses” made from cucumbers and “cows” made from eggplants are displayed to carry home and later return the ancestral spirits
Photo: Seamo/PIXTA



People wearing light yukata robes perform a bon-odori dance
Photo: Kokorosha

meant to entertain the ancestral spirits that returned then send them off having spent time together.

In summer, many festivals are held across Japan. Once in Japan, many people died from epidemics and natural disasters in summer. It is said that summer festivals began as a way to prevent these disasters and to pray for a good harvest in autumn. At these festivals, it is common to see people carrying *mikoshi* - the deities' vehicles - in parades through the town. The people carrying the mikoshi shake it violently, which is said to increase the deities' strength, leading to a good harvest and warding off disease.

Please tell us about some things you hope overseas visitors can experience when visiting Japan in the summer once COVID-19 subsides.

While I would want a visitor to experience the festivals, fireworks displays, and other lively events with crowds of people, I also hope they can get a sense of the quietness of summer. One place to experience this quietness is at Buddhist temples. I live close to Kamakura in Kanagawa Prefecture, a place with many old temples. I often visit these temples, and in summer we can experience a somewhat different quietness compared to other seasons. As I said before, traditional Japanese buildings have deep eaves and so, even during the day, rooms inside are dim. In summer, when the rays of sunshine are strong, the rooms appear even more dim. The shadows cast by buildings and trees also appear even darker. It may be the contrast between the light and these shadows that offers a unique quietness to summer.

When walking among temples with bamboo forests and beautiful moss gardens, you feel a sense of coolness even



At a festival, people carry aloft a mikoshi shrine
Photo: masa-0624/PIXTA

in the harsh heat. At some temples, you can try out *shakyo*, hand-copying sutras, a Buddhist training practice. As you focus on writing the text, it can help you forget about the heat. ㊦

Interview by SAWAJI OSAMU



Shakyo, the practice of hand-copying or tracing Buddhist sutras
Photo: Ystudio/PIXTA

Handmade Hemp and Ramie Fabrics Fit for the Summer Heat

The Koto region of Shiga Prefecture to the east of Lake Biwa, the largest lake in Japan, has been a production center for certain plant-based fabrics for over 600 years. Today, while keeping true to traditional techniques, the region is working not only on kimono but also on products with new applications that combine quality and design.

YANAGISAWA MIHO

FABRICS made from hemp, jute, ramie and linen are collectively known in Japan as *asa* (hemp) *orimono*, and high-quality *asa orimono* is called *jofu*. Having superior absorbency and wicking, these plant-based fabrics easily release heat and moisture from the body. They also have firmer fibers compared to cotton or silk so are highly breathable. With their light-feeling texture, they are ideal fabrics for summer clothing.

Linen, the most popular plant-based fabric today, was introduced to Japan in the Meiji period (1868-1912). Before then, hemp and ramie, different types of plant-based fabrics, were used in Japan. In particular, hemp was sacred and used for religious rituals since ancient times, such as for ropes that indicated a sacred place where gods descended or for ornamental aprons worn by sumo grand champions. The fibers are torn, twisted into thread, and the yarn is spun by connecting

one thread to another, but as the fibers are short, this is extremely time-consuming.

The Koto region of Shiga Prefecture, which has been well-known as a region of production for hemp- and ramie-based fabrics since the Muromachi period (1336-1573), continues to offer its special locally-made Omi jofu fabrics, products created by hand using techniques that have hardly changed over their roughly 600-year history. Omi jofu, which has been designated as a traditional craft product by the Japanese government, consists of two varieties: *kasuri* and *kibira*. *Kasuri* is fabric made with ramie threads that have been colored using a stencil dyeing technique to create *kasuri* patterns in the fabric when woven together. A wrinkled texture is sometimes introduced to the

An Omi jofu kimono for summer



Teumi, the process of making thread by hand

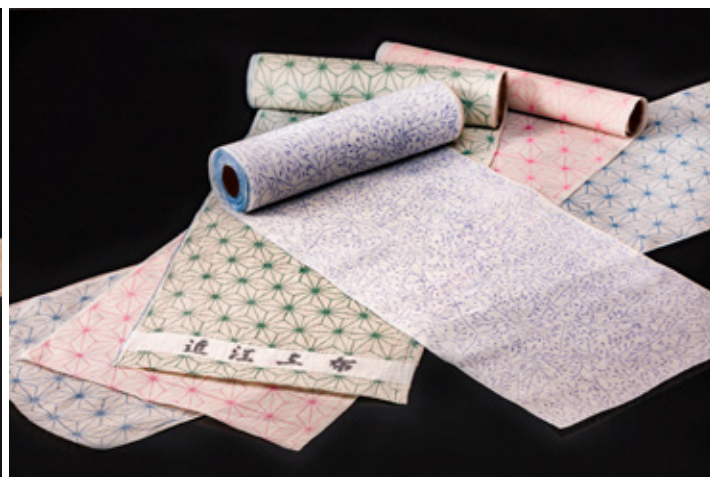


Weaving kasuri fabrics requires great attention to detail

All photos: Courtesy of Omi-jofu Traditional Kougei Center



Samples of kibira, Omi jofu fabric



Samples of kasuri, Omi jofu fabric

surface of kasuri by kneading the woven fabric. Kibira is a plain weave fabric that uses ramie for the warp and *teumi* hemp for the weft. Teumi refers to the process of tearing the hemp by hand to create very fine fibers and then twisting them together to form threads. It is a time-consuming process. Compared to ramie, hemp fibers are coarse and rigid, and hemp was often used for agricultural work clothing in the past, but in the Koto region, with great technical finesse, hemp was made into a soft, high-quality fabric that could be used for kimono and a variety of other purposes.

Tanaka Yumiko from the Omi Jofu Traditional Crafts Center says, “In other plant-based fabric production areas, these fabrics were made using ramie, which is easy to handle, but in the Koto region, textile makers ambitiously used hemp, which is crude as a fabric. And so kibira was born with a texture not inferior to ramie and, together with ramie kasuri, the Omi jofu brand was established.


“Kibira, which is finely woven using delicately spun thread, has a softer texture than linen. Once, when a person from a country in east Asia touched fabric from the Koto region, they told me that they didn’t know a material with a texture that felt so nice. I think this shows just how high the quality of the fabric is. With kasuri, a gap is formed between the fabric and the skin because the woven fabric has been shrunk through a process of rubbing it by hand. Because there is little surface area that touches the skin, it is extremely cool and, with its




smooth texture, I think it is just right to wear during the hot and humid Japanese summers.”

However, fewer time-consuming-to-create hemp- and ramie-based fabrics are now found in the marketplace. Currently, 80 to 90% of plant-based fabrics in Japan are linen and less than 10% are ramie, and after that hemp accounts for only a few percent.

“Because the yarn is carefully spun with only quality materials, only 5 to 10 grams of kibira thread can be made in a day,” Tanaka says. “It takes about two to three months just to create enough thread for an obi for kimono and it can take about six months to finish the obi. This means that the price of one obi is very high (roughly 9,000 USD). This isn’t something that sells easily, but there are some customers who want these products even if it takes a long time to make. This is all that is left today of this tradition of creating and selling products made using hemp gathered in Japan.

“Somehow, we will pass on Omi jofu, with its ability to offer a sense of cool in the summer, and not let it disappear.”

Taking on this task, the Omi Jofu Traditional Crafts Center works to train weavers while also working to develop masks, towels, aprons, headbands, and other products that match modern lifestyles using modern machine-woven fabrics for the promotion of fabric manufacturing, a traditional industry. These products are made with an emphasis on design, and increase the value of Omi jofu. 

Hemp	Linen	Ramie
		
Cannabaceae (annual)	Linaceae (annual)	Urticaceae (perennial)

Varieties of materials for plant-based fabrics

Kakigori A Sweet Summer Treat

Kakigori, or shaved ice, is a staple Japanese sweet summer treat dating back over a thousand years that continues to evolve with the changing times.

KATO KYOKO

Kakigori topped with a red, strawberry-flavored syrup





Kakigori made with avocado



Parfait-style kakigori with fresh strawberries



Parfait-style kakigori with chocolate cream and fresh raspberries



Kakigori with chestnuts and cream

KAKIGORI topped with sweet syrup is a very popular sweet summer treat in Japan. Recently, that popularity has grown even further as more and more shops offer gorgeous kakigori, including parfait-like versions featuring fluffy, melt-in-your-mouth ice topped with fruits and cream.

“In the last ten years or so, the number of specialty kakigori shops has increased across Japan. As people become more health-conscious, low-sugar kakigori incorporating farm-fresh seasonal fruits or *amazake*, a fermented rice drink, are also popular. Bowls of kakigori costing over 1,000 yen are not unusual,” says Koike Ryusuke, president of the Japan Kakigori Association.

The electric power shortages in the aftermath of the Great East Japan Earthquake in March 2011 sparked an even greater awareness of energy conservation among the Japanese people as they sought to devise ways to keep cool while reducing power consumption. One thing that became popular at that time was kakigori.

Kakigori has a long history in Japan, dating back to the middle of the Heian period (late eighth to late twelfth century). The oldest known reference to kakigori in existence today is “*kezurihi*” (shaved ice) in *Makura no soshi* (*The Pillow Book*), a collection of observations by Sei Shonagonⁱ, author and a lady at the Imperial Court of Japan. She considered that one of the most elegant things to eat was kakigori placed in a new metal bowl and topped with the sap of the *amazura*ⁱⁱ vine. At that time, ice in summer

was a precious commodity that only the privileged class could eat.

“In those days in various locations, such as the modern-day prefectures of Nara and Ishikawa, there were *himuro* (ice rooms) where ice that formed naturally in winter was stored to prevent it from melting. This simple method relied on caves and holes dug in the ground and insulation with rice straw and other materials, so much of the ice had probably melted by summer. Then from there it was transported to the capital, Kyoto, by which time it would likely have melted and shrunk even more. Still, for the nobility of the time it was a summer treat,” Koike explains.

Kakigori spread to the ordinary people from the Meiji period (1868-1912), when ice-making and ice-shaving machines began to find widespread use. In the summer, shops with banners and *noren* curtains announcing *kori* (the character for “ice” in Japanese) appeared on street corners and became a distinctive feature of the season. These banners featuring designs with the character for “ice” are very familiar to people in Japan today. The spread of refrigerators during the period of rapid economic growth in the 1960s and 1970s enabled households to make their own kakigori using simple shaved ice-makers, and at summer festivals, kakigori topped with colorful syrups such as red (strawberry and other flavors) and yellow (lemon and other flavors) became popular among children.

“The ice-making machines which were widely used at restaurants during the period of high economic growth produced small ice cubes, so the blades

of the ice-shaving machines hit the ice inconsistently, causing it to break up into granules and resulting in a crunchy texture. Large lumps of ice, on the other hand, can be shaved evenly and thinly, just like shaving wood with a plane, which gives the kakigori the fluffy texture that is popular today,” Koike explains.

Recently, more and more shops are offering new kinds of kakigori that look like Western-style confectionery or finely shaved fluffy ice served with fresh fruits.

In Japan, people enjoy coolness during the hot season with their own favorite kakigori. ⁷



A banner featuring the character for “ice” advertises kakigori for sale

i Born in the second half of the 10th century and died in the middle of the first half of the 11th century.

ii The *amazura* vine grew in the mountains and may refer to ivy. Sap from the vine was boiled down to produce a sweet substance.

Sunshade Curtains Made of Vines



A prize-winning green curtain at a nursery school

Activities to popularize “green curtains,” a measure to help mitigate global warming, have taken root in Shibata City, Niigata Prefecture.

SATO KUMIKO

IN Shibata City, located in northern Niigata Prefecture facing the Sea of Japan, buildings including public facilities such as the city hall and nursery schools, as well as offices and private residences, are covered in a screen of

plants in summer. This is a type of surface greening called a “green curtain,” whereby creeping plants, mainly annual bitter melons and morning glory, are trained over a net or trellis to form a screen. In addition to blocking the hot rays of the sun, these green curtains lower the surrounding temperature as a side effect of the leaves’ transpiration, and in recent years, they have been attracting attention as a measure against global warming. Moreover, when they are decorated with these green curtains, the buildings look more beautiful and create a feeling of coolness. For these reasons, the Green Curtain Project in Shibata, a project involving citizens to popularize the green curtain concept, was started in 2009.

The climate of Shibata City features a harsh winter, but there is high humidity throughout the year and summer is both hot and humid. Sato Kyoko, director of the non-profit You & Me no Kai and promoter of this project, says, “There is no air conditioning in our office, and it is really hot in summer. We experimented with a green curtain and found a 5°C difference between the room with the green curtain and the rooms without. I thought there was value in spreading this.”

You & Me no Kai takes on environmental



A prize-winning green curtain at a residential property



- 1 Green curtains at an elementary school in Shibata City
- 2 A bitter melon planting event at a nursery school in Shibata City
- 3 A green curtain arch at a nursery school
- 4 A sweet made using bitter melon

problems from the viewpoint of citizens, and thanks to their track record, once they advocated for the popularization of green curtains, cooperating companies appeared one after the next and it developed into a project that included the city's environment and health division.

Because they didn't want to breathe in chemical sprays when drawing in air through the green curtains from outside, Sato and others chose the bitter melon plant as the main plant for the curtains as it does not attract many insects. This plant originates in tropical areas in Asia and there were concerns that it wouldn't grow well in the climate of Niigata Prefecture, but after researching growing methods with the help of Niigata Prefectural Shibata Agricultural High School, You & Me no Kai was able to establish a stable method for raising seedlings that was suitable for the climate of Shibata City. Three years ago, students at the school began participating in the raising of seedlings, and they delivered about 1,700 plants to more than 250 facilities and households in the city this year.

Since the second year of the project, they have held a cooking contest in the city to help popularize the project and, since the sixth year, a photo contest. The bitter melon has a unique bitterness that is not to everyone's taste, but the fruit is

full of vitamins, minerals and other nutrients, and being able to harvest this fruit is another attractive feature of the green curtains. Sato says, "For the cooking contest, participants proposed ideas that surprised everyone, such as recipes that make it easy for children to eat the bitter melon, and ways to process it into desserts, such as candied bitter melon and pancakes."

In addition, to encourage young children to think about environmental problems through the cultivation of green curtains, a picture card show was created in which high school and university students in the city tell stories to children using the cards with songs and dances. This series of activities has been highly praised, and the project in Shibata City was awarded the Minister of the Environment's Award for Global Warming Prevention Activities in 2018.

Currently, in addition to growing green curtains, local residents are having fun with creative ideas such as making green arches and tunnels. As a result, air conditioning use is declining at homes with green curtains. Shibata City enters the twelfth summer of its Green Curtain Project this year. **17**

Swimming with a parasol and folding fans, Koike-ryu

The Classical Swimming Arts of Japan

***Nihon eiho* (Japanese classical swimming arts), which developed as a martial art, differs from modern competitive swimming and is a uniquely Japanese way of swimming that has been passed down through the centuries and is familiar to people of different generations.**

SASAKI TAKASHI

Since Japan is surrounded by water on all sides, its people have been diving into the sea in search of fish and shellfish since time immemorial. That is, swimming was a technique indispensable to daily life.



The “flying mullet,” Nojima-ryu



The “crane dance,” Nojima-ryu

All photos: Courtesy of KITAMURA TOSHIFUMI

Yamane says, “In a time of constant warfare, combatants would sometimes have to fight across rivers or near the sea and the shore, so swimming was something samurai had to learn. Command of the sea was especially important in western Japan where the Seto Inland Sea was a strategic hub for maritime traffic. The sea was a battlefield as well. Noshima Island in the Seto Inland Sea was the base of the famous Murakami Suigun (Murakami navy). Swimming at the time meant swimming without getting your baggage wet, swimming in armor, getting quickly up on the gunwale from the water, diving, and stretching up out of the water to look afar, so it was probably breaststroke and treading water mostly.”

“I think people outside Japan can bring to mind scenes where people dive under water for long periods of time, which you sometimes see in ninja movies. Ninja habitually practiced hiding in water, but samurai also prepared for fighting in water and regularly practiced techniques for carrying weapons, ammunition, and food for battle without them getting wet. Breaststroke was optimal for swimmers to conserve energy by using the flow of the water while keeping their eyes on their destination. Meanwhile, treading water was suitable for several people to carry baggage together.”

By the seventeenth century, when the Tokugawa shogunate ushered in the Edo period and an age of peace arrived, suijutsu like many other martial arts came to emphasize spirituality and generated many schools. After that, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, with the demise of the Tokugawa shogunate and the end of the Edo period, the samurai class disappeared and thus the handing down of suijutsu as a martial art was temporarily interrupted. However, training pools and swimming schools similar to those of today were established across Japan, continuing the suijutsu tradition. It is said that these played an important role in preventing child drowning accidents at the time.

At present, the Japan Swimming Federation recognizes thirteen schools of Nihon eiho, and these all come together once a

year to participate in the Nihon Eiho Taikai tournament. This year’s competition is the 66th and has swimmers compete in a variety of swimming styles. Events include seeing who can swim the 100 meters sidestroke the fastest and who can tread water holding iron dumbbells the longest.

Meanwhile, having developed as a martial art, Nihon eiho has generally been thought of as something completely different from the timed races of competitive swimming. Even so, out of the four competitive swimming strokes, breaststroke has many things in common with the ideas of Nihon eiho as both disciplines value each and every stroke, which some think is one reason for the many medals won by Japanese swimmers in Olympic breaststroke. Techniques like treading water and scissors kicks that are peculiar to Nihon eiho also come to good use in artistic swimming. The Hamadera Swimming School (Sakai City, Osaka Prefecture), which teaches the Nojima-ryu swimming that goes back to the Murakami navy, has produced a large number of Olympic athletes.

Yamane comments, “Nihon eiho competitions are held in pools nowadays, but the techniques were originally practiced in nature, such as the sea, rivers and lakes. In fact, if you are out at sea, swimming with competitive styles quickly makes you tired, but using Nihon eiho, which teaches the adept use of waves and surges, you can keep swimming for a long time. For example, Nihon eiho techniques are perfect if you want to swim in the summer sea while watching the sunset at your leisure.”

There are no timed competitions even in qualifying events of Nihon eiho. Advanced practitioners are required not only to master styles but also achieve unity with the water. This is likely a reason why Nihon eiho is beloved as a lifetime sport by people of all generations. ^[7]

ⁱ During the Sengoku period, the authority of the Shogunate was lost, various warlords competed nationwide and there were many wars.



Armored swimming, Kobori-ryu



A group performance with fans, Koike-ryu

Kyo-sensu folding fans

Photo: Courtesy of Miyawaki Baisen Co., Ltd.



A Kyo-sensu folding fan made in collaboration with Kyoto-based *nihonga* (Japanese-style painting) artist Sadaie Ayuko
Photo: Courtesy of Miyawaki Baisen Co., Ltd.

KYOTO FOLDING FANS

Beauty and Utility



1



2



3

- 1 Hiogi fans are an essential feature of traditional court attire
- 2 Ondotori float directors at the Gion festival holding sensu fans
- 3 Miyawaki Baisen Co., Ltd. is passing on traditional skills by training highly proficient craftspeople

Photos: Courtesy of Miyawaki Baisen Co., Ltd. (1, 3); JAPAN IMAGES (2)

Since long ago, folding fans have been used in Japan's hot humid summers to create a gentle cooling breeze. Among these fans is the *Kyo-sensu* (Kyoto folding fan), which is characterized by its delicate construction.

SATO KUMIKO

A folding fan, or *sensu*, is made of paper glued onto a bamboo or wooden frame and is small and light enough to fold and slip into a bag or purse and carry around. When you want to cool down you can simply take it out and open it to create a gentle breeze. The high portability and convenience of the *sensu* has led to its enduring presence in Japan through the ages as a practical summer accessory.

Sensu are produced in a number of Japanese regions, and those produced in Kyoto are called *Kyo-sensu*. As well as having an appealing tactile quality, smooth opening mechanism, and ease of use, *Kyo-sensu* are decorated with colorful, original hand-painted designs created in past ages, and are thus known for their seamless fusion of beauty and utility. Minami Tadamasu, the eighth-generation head and president of Miyawaki Baisen Co., Ltd., established in 1823, and president of the Kyoto Folding Fan & Round Fan Association of Commerce and Industry, explains the characteristics of *Kyo-sensu* as follows.

"The term 'Kyo-sensu' refers to products made by craftsmen in Kyoto Prefecture using materials from Kyoto and the surrounding areas. The tip of the *Kyo-sensu* becomes thinner when closed, and the preferred designs are hand-painted motifs depicting beauties of nature that evoke the seasons, such as dragonflies."

The original *sensu* are said to have derived from wooden slats called *mokkan* that were bound and used to record information. The *hiogi* fan made from slats of *hinoki*, or Japanese cypress, was derived from that shape. The oldest existing *hiogi* fan is inscribed with "the first year of the Genkei period" (877). From the Heian period (late eighth to late twelfth century), it was the correct form for women to hold a *hiogi* fan when they wore the layered *junihitoe* robe, the formal attire of women

at the Imperial Court. According to the literature, the *sensu* made of paper were first made in around the tenth century and exported to China in around the thirteenth century. These fans later found their way to Europe, where they evolved into Western folding fans.


Today, some *sensu* are made from silk cloth and thinly shaved fragrant wood such as sandalwood, but *Kyo-sensu* are typically produced by inserting a skeleton of thin bamboo strips into a sheet of paper. Production actually involves eighty-seven processes, from shaving the bamboo to processing the paper and through to final assembly of the *sensu*, entailing a high degree of division of labor between artisans.

Says Minami, "Nowadays, *sensu* are mainly used for practical, everyday purposes, but they were originally used for such things as court ceremonies. Even now, the *sensu* is an essential item for rituals and solemn occasions."

In Japan, the shape of an open fan is referred to as *sue-hirogari*, literally "spreading out like an open fan." This shape is widely considered to be auspicious, with the gradual widening of the fan toward the end signifying increasing prosperity. As such, the *sensu* is an indispensable accessory for the bride and groom when holding a wedding ceremony dressed in kimono, traditional Japanese attire.

The *sensu* is also a feature of the Gion festival in Kyoto, a month-long festival held in July. The highlight of the festival is the Yamahoko procession, when thirty-three spectacular *yamahoko* floats are pulled through the streets of Kyoto by 40 to 50 people led by *ondotori* float directors holding *sensu*.

In recent years, young people have also been rediscovering *sensu*. Miyawaki Baisen too is collaborating with fashion brands to create *sensu* for the younger generation. "As well as bringing in new ideas, we see it as our duty to train craftsmen in order to ensure that the skills are passed down to the next generation," says Minami.

With a history and tradition of over one thousand years, *Kyo-sensu* continue to add gorgeous color to Japanese summers, while epitomizing both beauty and utility. 

The Sand Beach as Art Museum

At Kuroshio Town in Kochi Prefecture, the beautiful Irino Beach doubles as an art gallery called the Sunabi Museum.

SASAKI TAKASHI



THE one-of-a-kind Sunabi Museum (in Japanese, Sunahama Bijutsukan) is located on the Pacific coast of southwestern Kochi Prefecture in Kuroshio, a town with a population of about 10,000. Despite being an art “museum” by name, Sunabi Museum has no buildings. Irino Beach, which stretches for 4 kilometers and is a famous feature of Kuroshio Town, is itself considered to be an art museum for regularly holding art exhibitions and other creative events in the picturesque natural landscape.

The Sunabi Museum evolved out of a T-shirt Art Exhibition that was first held in 1989. This exhibition had originated in an idea of photographer Kitade Hiroki to have T-shirts printed with his photographs fluttering in the wind on the beach. Artist Umebara Makoto, a resident of Kochi and friend of Kitade, approached the young officials at the

town hall about implementing the idea on Irino Beach.

Murakami Kentaro, a representative of the non-profit Sunabi Museum, says, “Elaborate events like this were held everywhere at the time as it was the boom period of the economic bubble in Japan. But most of these events were not rooted in the community and ended after being held just once. There were fears that the T-shirt Art Exhibition would turn out the same way. The idea for the Sunabi Museum evolved from the many meetings that Umebara and the local town officials held to dispel those concerns.”

The concept the organizers arrived at was to turn the beautiful local sand beach itself into a museum. The museum regards everything on the beach as art, from the works exhibited on the beach, to the designs in the sand drawn by the waves and wind, the sight of the children playing at the water’s edge, or the whales

swimming in the open sea.

Since then, over the course of thirty years, the Sunabi Museum has hosted a variety of exhibitions and events. Among them, the T-shirt Art Exhibition that started it all is very popular and has come to gather many submissions from all over Japan. Other popular events include the annual Seaside Barefoot Marathon, the Sea Breeze Quilt Exhibition held in pine forests along the sandy beach, and the Washed Ashore Exhibition, which gathers a diverse range of items that have washed up on shore. Whale watching tours are also held to watch the dolphins and the Bryde’s whales that have been appointed as “curators” of the museum.

Murakami says that what he most wants visitors to appreciate are the permanent exhibits; in other words, everyday scenes of the beach. “When you forget about the passing of time and view the beautiful Irino Beach,” he says, “you



The T-shirt Art Exhibition



A Bryde's whale, an appointed "curator" of the Sunabi Museum, breaks the surface of the sea



The Sea Breeze Quilt Exhibition

will surely feel as if you have encountered a work of art."

Irino Beach is sometimes called the "Salar de Uyuni of Kochi" in reference to the famous reflective salt flat in Bolivia. On Irino Beach too, if the conditions are right, the wet sand reflects the light like a mirror.

Sunabi Museum became a non-profit organization in 2003 and now also manages the neighboring park and tourist promotion, playing an important role as a base for the revitalization of Kuroshio Town. The organization attracts volunteers from all over Japan who support its initiatives, while the pioneering T-shirt Art Exhibition and other Sunabi Museum events are now held across Japan and overseas as well.

The unprecedented idea of turning a beautiful beach itself into an art museum resonates with many people, going beyond regional and national borders. 7



Exhibits in the Washed Ashore Exhibition

Restaurants and teahouses with *nouryou-yuka*, viewed over the Kamogawa river in Kyoto City at dusk
Photo: Courtesy of Tratto Brain

Nouryou-Yuka

A Kyoto Summer Tradition

Enjoy a meal or drink tea beside the Kamogawa river in Kyoto while feeling the cool breeze and watching the water flow by. We introduce a summer cultural tradition that offers a relaxing experience for both Kyoto residents and visitors alike.

YANAGISAWA MIHO

The *nouryou-yuka* wooden decks look out over the Kamogawa river toward the Higashiyama mountains
Photo: Courtesy of Tratto Brain

THE *nouryou-yuka* which line the bank of the Kamogawa river that flows through the city of Kyoto are a seasonal tradition that adds style to the summer.

Nouryou-yuka are raised wooden decks with tatami mat seating overlooking the river that restaurants and *chaya* teahousesⁱ set up in the summer, allowing customers to cool down outside while enjoying a meal or drinking tea.

Tanaka Hiroshi, representative director of the Kyoto Kamogawa Nouryou-Yuka Cooperative Association, has this to say about nouryou-yuka.

“Many places in Kyoto have become modernized, but the scenery along the Kamogawa river remains much the same as in the old Kyoto. The raised wooden seating decks looking out over the river let you enjoy the natural breeze while listening to the flow of the river and viewing the lush green of the thirty-six peaks of Higashiyama. One of the true pleasures of the seating decks is that they enable visitors to get a sense of the natural environment of Kyoto, which has been described as the city of purple hills and crystal streams.”

Long ago there were large sandbanks in the Kamogawa river. Theaters and *chaya* teahouses were built on these sandbanks because of their proximity to the Yasaka Shrine, which attracted many visitors during the annual Gion Festivalⁱⁱ. In the late sixteenth century, *chaya* teahouses and merchants set up wooden fold-up stools for their customers on these sandbanks in the river. This is said to be the origins of the nouryou-yuka. In the late seventeenth century, as a flood-prevention measure, the sand was dredged from the Kamogawa river and the sandbanks were removed. Embankments were then constructed along both banks of the river close to where the nouryou-yuka stand today. On these embankments, nouryou-yuka decks raised on stilts were constructed, and in the summer the riverbanks and shallows became packed full of wooden fold-up stools lined up like benches. These scenes were depicted in many ukiyo-e woodblock prints, and the *Miyako meisho zue* series of prints, which introduced famous places in Kyoto, led to the summer tradition of nouryou-yuka becoming known throughout Japan. However, in the Meiji period (1868-1912), setting up nouryou-yuka using wooden fold-up stools on riverbanks and shallows was banned as flood-prevention construction work continued. Nouryou-yuka raised decks took their place, but could not be constructed on the east bank of the Kamogawa river owing to the construction there of a canal and railroad. As a result, nouryou-yuka decks raised on stilts are only to be found on the west bank of the Kamogawa, between Nijo-dori and Gojo-dori.

Today, nouryou-yuka are not only occupied by Japanese restaurants serving *Kyo-kaiseki* (traditional Kyoto cuisine), but there are also many bars and other establishments serving

Italian, French, Chinese, Thai and Korean cuisine. In 2006, they were joined by the coffee-house chain Starbucks. The nouryou-yuka may have changed with the times, but respect for this Kyoto tradition remains strong.

“Rules have been drawn up to prevent any establishment spoiling the visual appearance of the nouryou-yuka,” says Tanaka. “For example, deck floors must be of a uniform height, be designed in a Japanese style as much as possible, and *sudare* screens only should be used to separate the establishments using the decks. Cultural traditions have rules and I believe that some places can only be enjoyed if those rules are followed. The nouryou-yuka is one such cultural tradition.

“The operating period has been from May to the end of September, but with more establishments serving lunch in recent times, we are extending it by one month to the end of October



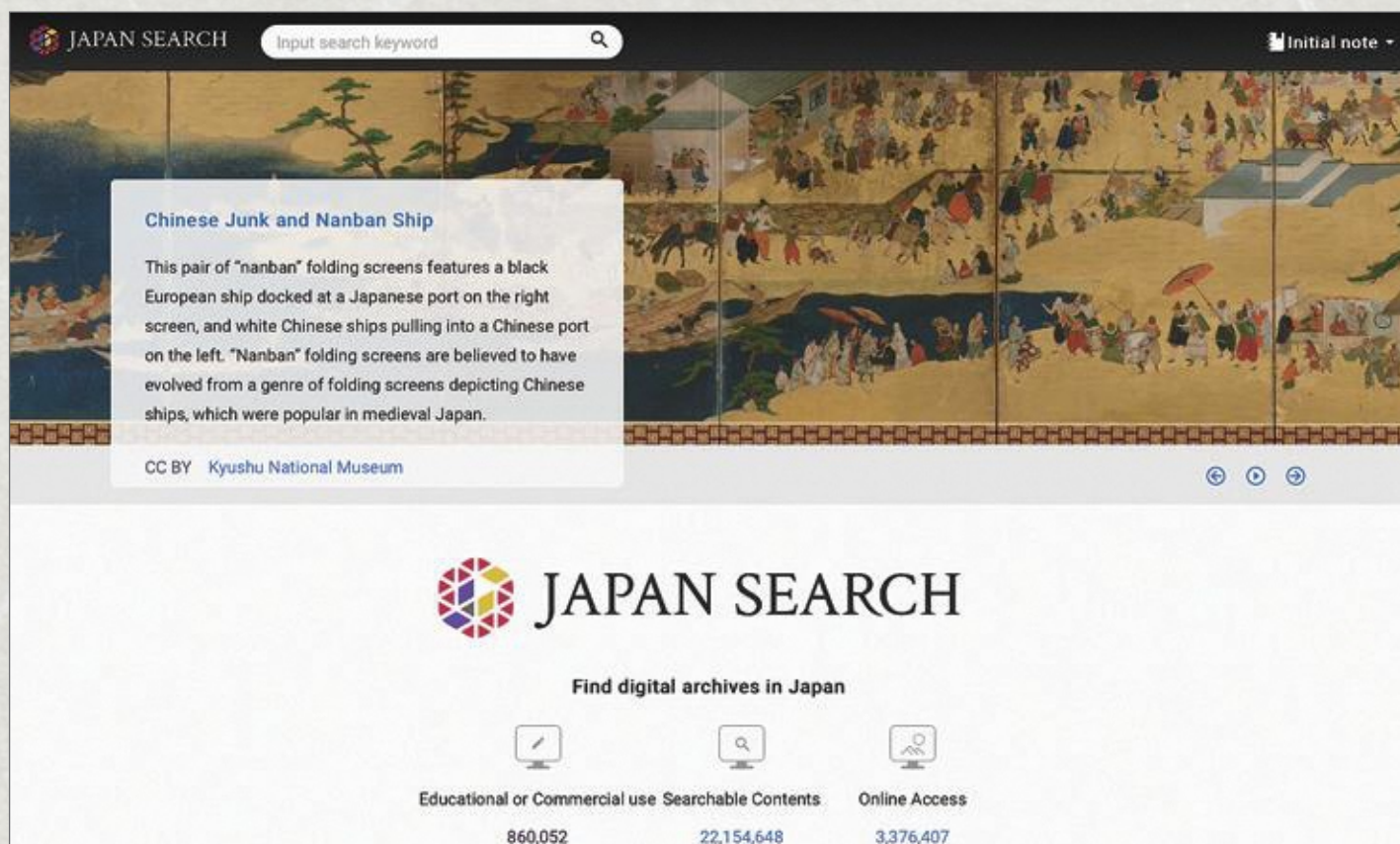
Kyo-kaiseki, traditional Kyoto cuisine
Photo: Courtesy of KASSAI

this year. Of course, we are taking all necessary measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 based on public health center guidance. We are preserving tradition while at the same time adapting to the modern age when tradition no longer serves the needs of the times. I would like to preserve the nouryou-yuka as a classic Kyoto tradition to be enjoyed by many people of all ages.”

Nouryou-yuka has been flexible in adapting to the times while observing tradition. That’s why since the seventeenth century it has drawn many people of all ages and nationalities in search of “cool.” 🍷

i *Chaya* are small venues for entertaining guests. These establishments do not prepare full meals. Instead, food is brought in by caterers (restaurants that specialize in on-site cooking).

ii One of Japan’s three major festivals. The festival is held annually in July at the Gion and Yasaka Shrines in Kyoto. It began in 869 as an appeal to the gods to suppress a plague that was spreading through the city.



Top page of Japan Search

Japan Search:

A National Platform of Digital Archives

Japan Search is a platform that promotes the use of Japan’s “digital archives.” It enables users to search, browse, and utilize the books, cultural assets, media arts, and other content held by libraries, museums, art galleries, and other cultural facilities in Japan.

SAWAJI OSAMU

The spread of the internet and the increasing digitization of society around the world has made it possible for everyone to access a wide variety of content on a personal computer or smartphone. In response to such a situation, the Japanese government is devoting efforts to the creation, coordination, and use and application of “digital archives.” A digital archive

is “a body of mechanisms that collects, stores, and provides a variety of digital information resources.”¹

The creation of digital archives has been under way in Japan since the early 2000s, mainly in public institutions. Libraries and museums have digitized information such as the titles and images of books and cultural assets in their collections to enable them to be searched and

viewed by the general public. In the 2010s, the Japanese government positioned the promotion of digital archive use as a key policy because digital archives “collect Japan’s knowledge beyond sectors and regions,” can be “utilized for academic research, education, disaster prevention, and business,” and “promote inbound tourism and stimulate studies on Japan in overseas countries.”² The government

¹ https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/singi/titeki2/digitalarchive_kyougikai/houkokusho.pdf

² https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/singi/titeki2/kettei/chizaikaku20170516_e.pdf

³ Data related to the description of the details, form, location, etc. of content

has been making efforts such as formulation of guidelines and amendment of the Copyright Act to promote the creation and sharing of digital archives.

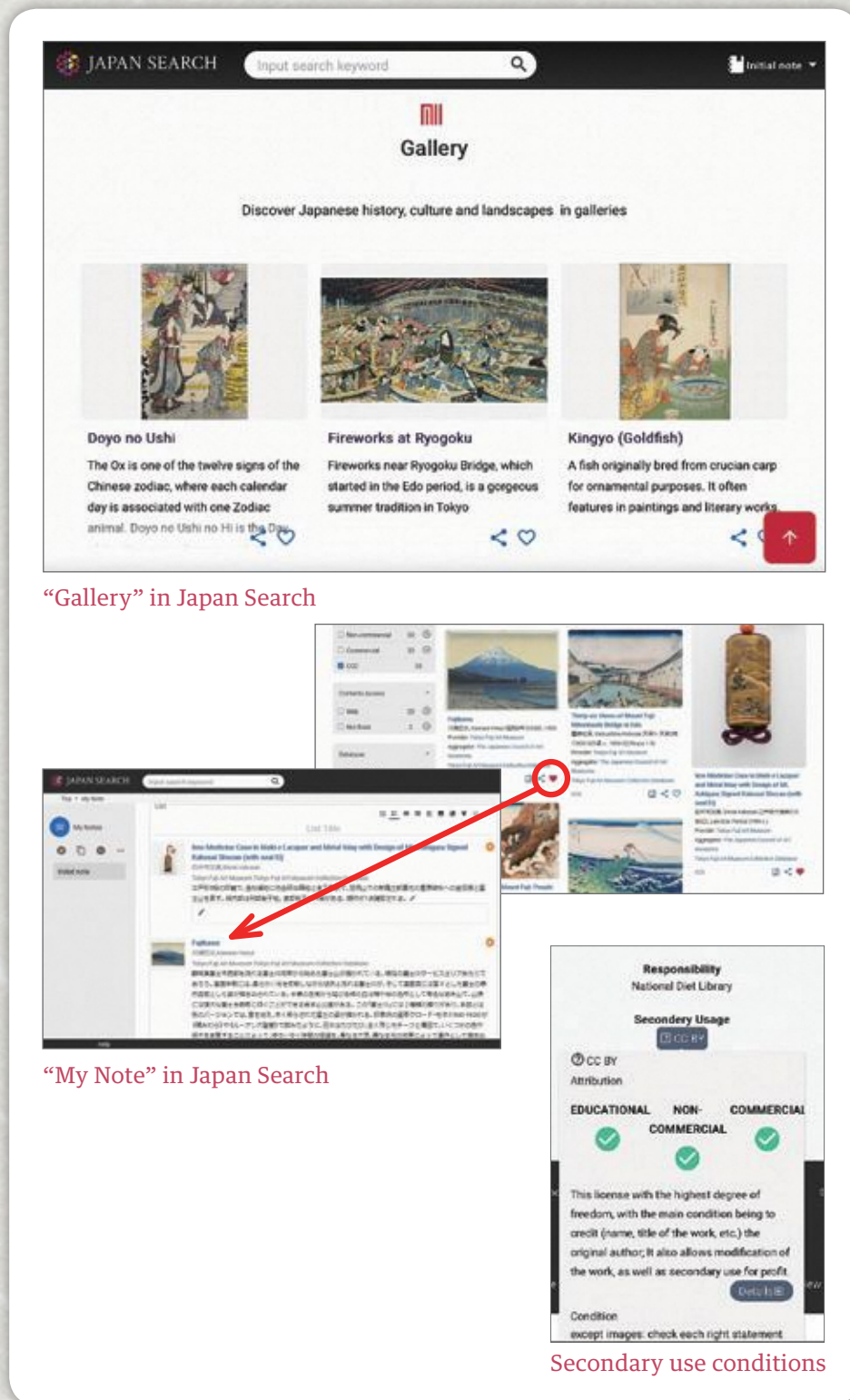
As part of these efforts, Japan Search (<https://jpsearch.go.jp>), an infrastructure for providing multi-sectoral metadata³ for digital content, was released in August 2020. Japan Search is a national initiative managed by a committee whose secretariat is set up in the Cabinet Office. The National Diet Library is in charge of collaborative practice and systems. As of July 2021, it connects 125 databases of 26 coordinator (aggregator) organizations, including the National Archives of Japan, the National Museum of Art, the University of Tokyo, and NHK (Nippon Hoso Kyokai, Japan Broadcasting Corporation). Through Japan Search, users can search in one place for metadata on a wide range of content recorded in each database, including books, official documents, cultural assets, art, movies, radio and TV programs, animation, and maps.

How to use Japan Search

Japan Search allows users to search using a variety of methods, such as by entering keywords in Japanese or English, by narrowing down the field or usage criteria of content, or by images. For example, a search using the keyword “ukiyo-e” will display information of ukiyo-e works or books about ukiyo-e such as the titles of works, names of authors, location of collections, and thumbnail images of content recorded in the linked databases. This data can also be shared on SNS.

The secondary use conditions for content are also displayed. For example, users can confirm the conditions governing use of images for commercial purposes, or for non-commercial purposes if the author of the original work is credited.

Japan Search has a “Gallery” that introduces Japanese history and culture under various themes. This is a “digital exhibition” in the sense that the National Diet Library picks up a number of themed contents from the searchable content on Japan Search and posts them together with images and explanatory text. The Gallery enables users to view the breadth



“Gallery” in Japan Search

“My Note” in Japan Search

Secondary use conditions

of digital content offered through Japan Search and its possible applications even without conducting a search.

An additional feature offered by Japan Search is “My Note,” which allows anyone to create their own gallery. Users can collect their favorite content in their own “My Note” page, add notes to the content they have collected, and download the data in a variety of formats such as Excel and HTML.

Since its release, Japan Search has

seen an increase in the number of collaborating institutions and the number of searchable contents. Japan Search is sure to continue to develop as a platform for people in Japan and abroad to encounter the diverse and rich contents of Japan’s digital archives. ^[7]

Note: This article has been created with the consent of the National Diet Library and on the basis of materials published by the Library.



An outdoor worker wearing a Kuchofuku (空調服™) jacket

Cooling the Body with Fan-Equipped Clothes

Japan is seeing the rapid spread of work clothes that aim to protect against heat as well as reduce CO₂ emissions.

UMEZAWA AKIRA

The Japanese summer is very hot and very humid. Especially in recent times, successive years have seen severe heatwaves with a danger of heatstroke for people working in factories and outdoors. A certain type of work clothes is currently spreading rapidly in such workplaces. It is Kuchofuku (空調服™), a brand of fan-equipped clothes with fans installed in the back. The fans attached to the clothes

suck outside air into the clothes, evaporating sweat, thereby releasing heat through vaporization and cooling the body. The clothing was developed by Ichigaya Hiroshi, a former Sony engineer and the founder and chairman of Kuchofuku Co., Ltd.

The trigger to Ichigaya's development of Kuchofuku clothing was a business trip he made to Southeast Asia to sell his former company's products in the 1990s.

He explains, "At the time, the economies of countries like Thailand and Malaysia were growing rapidly, so big buildings were being constructed all over the place. Seeing those urban areas, I thought, 'If in the near future developing countries start habitually using air conditioners like the Japanese do, then there'll be an energy crisis. We need cooling devices that save energy.'"

"It takes a large amount of energy to

Image showing the direction of airflow inside a Kuchofuku (空調服™) fan-equipped jacket

fully cool a space such as a room. So, is it somehow possible to just cool the air around each person?”

With these thoughts in mind, Ichigaya started developing products that make people feel cool by just wearing a piece of clothing. The first prototype developed in 1999 pumped water from a water tank attached to the waist, wet a cooling cloth in the back of the clothes, and removed heat by having a fan vaporize the water. However, Ichigaya gave up on this idea

「空調服」



Workers' Kuchofuku (空調服™) jackets billow with fan-blown air



Loose-fitting silhouette Kuchofuku (空調服™) shirt. Collaboration with the LASKA label (JOURNAL STANDARD), BAYCREW'S Co., Ltd.

since water leaked from the joint between tank and pipe.

Was there no way to release heat through vaporization without making the clothes wet? He was exploring this question when the idea came to him of using sweat.

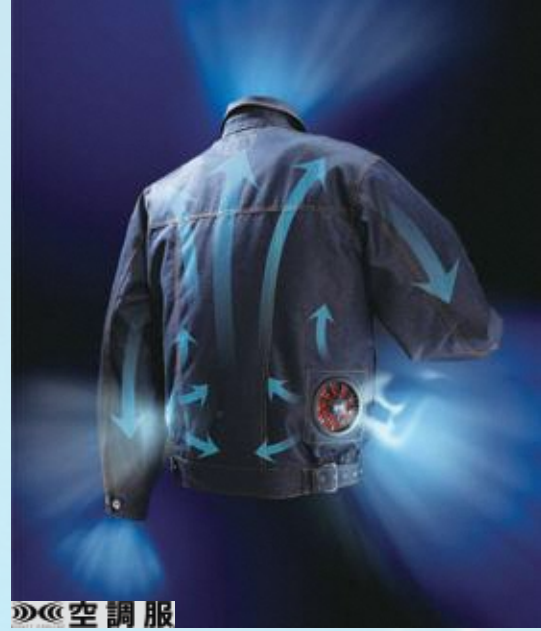
Ichigaya comments, “Humans perspire to prevent skin temperature from increasing too much and we have the ability to maintain optimal temperature by reducing skin temperature through vaporization as sweat evaporates. I decided to use this mechanism.”

By attaching fans around the waist and having the air circulate around the whole upper body before exiting at the collar and cuffs, it is possible to efficiently evaporate sweat. Ichigaya named this mechanism the “Theory of Physiological Air Conditioning (生理クーラー®)” and commenced development. He first had to pick the fabric knowing that to efficiently circulate the air he needed a material that did not leak air. After testing more than 1,000 fabrics, he selected the most optimal. He also used ingenuity in the fan development, such as adjusting the shape and placement of the blades with millimeter precision, to ensure strong force, low power consumption, and quiet sound.

In 2004, he finally completed a product he was happy with and released it on the market. Sales did not grow as much as he had expected in the decade that followed, but the word gradually started getting around among workers at farms and construction sites across Japan, and it became a hit product with sales of 360,000 items in 2016.

“I got many happy comments from users, such as, ‘I used to not be able to eat due to the heat every summer and had to work while on an intravenous drip, but I don’t need to anymore thanks to Kuchofuku. Now, I can’t work without them.’ Whenever I hear the sincere feelings of regular users, I feel working so hard to develop the clothing was worth it.”


In 2017, Kuchofuku was recognized for its power-saving and CO₂ emission-reducing effects as heat protection, and was awarded the Minister of the Environment’s Commendation for Global Warming Prevention Activity. At present, it is not only sold as work clothes but is also



A miniature fan used in Kuchofuku (空調服™) clothing

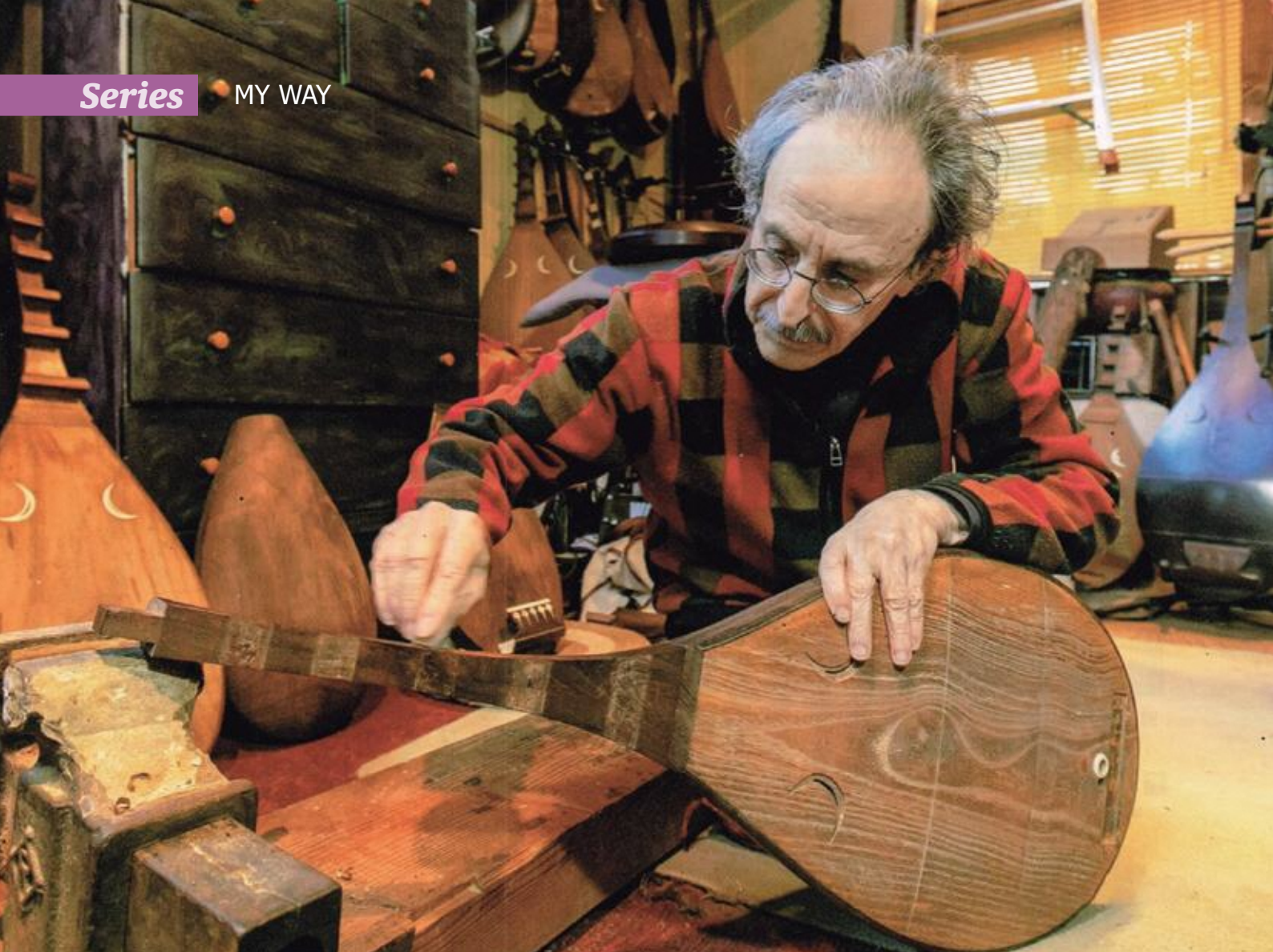


marketed in cooperation with apparel brands and outdoor clothing makers, and as products for women and children.

There are many countries around the world that are hotter than Japan. Ichigaya’s immediate goals—over the next five to ten years—are for Kuchofuku to be popularized not just as work clothes but also as something anyone can wear without it feeling strange while moreover contributing to preventing global warming. Filled with such hopes, Ichigaya keeps on working to improve his Kuchofuku. 

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An Italian Artisan Who Inherited the Traditional Craft of Chikuzen *Biwa*

Italian Doriano Sulis was charmed by the tones of the *biwa* (Japanese lute), and he has made and restored Chikuzen *biwa* in Fukuoka City, Fukuoka Prefecture for more than forty-five years.

SATO KUMIKO

The *biwa* is one of many traditional instruments that are still played in Japan today. The *biwa* is thought to have originated in China and before that western Asia and is similar in design to the ancient European lute. The strings of the lute are plucked by hand like a guitar, but the sound of the *biwa* is produced using a plectrum commonly made of wood and similar in shape to the leaf of the ginkgo tree. It is believed that a version of the instrument was brought to Japan somewhere between the seventh and eighth centuries via the Silk Road and then developed into its present forms.

There are five types of *biwa* still played today: the Gaku *biwa* used in *gagaku*¹ court music, the Heike *biwa*, the Moso *biwa*, the Satsuma *biwa*, and the Chikuzen *biwa*, which is usually

¹ *Gagaku* is an art form created between the 5th and 10th centuries through a fusion of ancient Japanese ritual music and dance with instrumental music and dance brought to Japan from China and the Korean Peninsula.

Doriano Sulis at work restoring a Chikuzen biwa

used to accompany songs. However, the number of people who can make any of these biwa is steadily decreasing. In the case of the Chikuzen biwa, there is only one person who specializes in making this instrument, and he isn't Japanese; he is an Italian man, Doriano Sulis.

Doriano learned classical guitar at the national college of music the Conservatorio di Musica Santa Cecilia in Rome. He married a Japanese woman whom he met in Rome, and came to Japan in 1974, intending to stay only for a short time. After about six months, however, he heard the sound of the biwa on the radio, and his life was greatly changed.

Reminiscing about that time, Doriano says that he was greatly surprised by the unique and mysterious timbre of the biwa when he first heard it. He then visited the workshop of Yoshizuka Genzaburo, who made biwa in Fukuoka City, Fukuoka Prefecture, the birthplace of the Chikuzen biwa. Yoshizuka, who was designated as an intangible cultural property by Fukuoka Prefecture in 1975, was said at the time to



Doriano (left) in his days as an apprentice to Yoshizuka Genzaburo (right)

be the last Chikuzen biwa artisan.

When Doriano learned that Yoshizuka did not have a successor, he quickly asked to be his apprentice. In fact, he started training under Yoshizuka the very next day. Doriano learned how to make Chikuzen biwa from Yoshizuka for the next five years, and continues to practice Yoshizuka's traditional techniques. Following Yoshizuka's death, Doriano became the sole Chikuzen biwa artisan.

Doriano is now furthering his studies by acquiring old biwa made by various biwa artisans while continuing to accumulate as much related knowledge as he can.


Currently, Doriano is working hard at restoring old biwa, some of which are more than 300 years old. Different from repairing damaged parts, restoration is the work of returning the instrument to the condition when it was made as much as possible. According to Doriano, the difficulty lies in the fact that there is no standard for making biwa. "Chikuzen Biwa were made with great ingenuity as the artisans competed with their techniques. No two biwa are the same. That's why it's so interesting to work on restoration, guessing the creator's intentions.

Chikuzen biwa feature a body of hollowed-out mulberry wood with a paulownia front plate, and are strung with silk. Over the years, it has become difficult to obtain aged mulberry wood, and so Doriano procures the wood through the help of a friend. He sometimes takes intricate parts from older biwa. The restored biwa is finished with the application of a wax coating. The biwa that are restored in this way are all highly valued

as works of art.

In the winter of 2020, an exhibition was held displaying a collection of biwa that Doriano had restored, entitled, "Reviving Biwa: Doriano Sulis' Restored Biwa Exhibition." In the spring of 2021, Doriano opened the Biwakan, a private school to pass on the inherited techniques to the next generation. Currently, there are ten students from across Japan, and two of them have officially become Doriano's apprentices.

"There are subtle fluctuations in the tone of the biwa," says Doriano. "When hearing the timbre of the biwa for the first time, people tend to feel a sense of nostalgia."

For the biwa to survive, of course, passionate biwa players are just as important as skilled biwa makers and restorers. As a biwa artisan, Doriano's hope for his students is that appreciation of the biwa will spread across the world not as a unique or antique folk instrument, but as an instrument that can be used freely to play music. 



A beautiful old four-string Chikuzen biwa, one of Doriano's most prized possessions



Doriano in his workshop teaching students the correct way to cut wood

Managing Aso Grasslands for Sustainable Agriculture

Akaushi (Japanese Brown) cattle graze on an Aso region grassland

In the Aso region of Kumamoto Prefecture, there are expansive grasslands that are said to have been used as grazing land for more than 1,000 years, during which time the people have over and over again burned off dead grass, sent out livestock to graze, and cut the grass. In 2013, in recognition of the people's various efforts to maintain and ensure cyclical use of the beautiful grasslands, "Managing Aso Grasslands for Sustainable Agriculture" was designated as a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System (GIAHS) by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations.

YANAGISAWA MIHO

The Kusasenrigahama plain



Globe thistles



The Oorurishijimi (Large Shijimi Blue) butterfly

There are expansive grasslands at the northern foot of Eboshi-dake, one of the five peaks of Mount Aso situated at the center of the huge caldera which is a famous symbol of Kumamoto Prefecture. These unobstructed, continuous grasslands are known as the Kusasenrigahama plain. These large grasslands alone extend to about 785,000 square meters over the remnants of a pair of volcanic craters that were formed about 30,000 years ago. They have become a popular tourist spot receiving many visitors as they can be reached by car easily, despite having an elevation of over 1,000 meters above sea level.


“Actually, these grasslands around Mount Aso were not formed entirely by nature,” says Sakamoto Taku of Kumamoto Prefecture’s Aso Regional Promotion Bureau. “Since ancient times, people here have burned off dead grass, sent out livestock to graze, and cut the grasses over and again. The grasslands were formed and maintained over an extensive period of time. It is thought that these grasslands were already formed by the beginning of the tenth century, and that they mainly supported the agriculture of the region as food and as a pasture for horses and cows, essential animals in rice farming, and also as a place to produce compost.”

The Aso soil is acidic due to the volcanic ash that fell and collected over the entire area, so it is not fit for farming. The people here, however, improved the soil for generations with cow and horse manure and compost made using their grass. Hill paths that link the small towns in the valleys to the grasslands in

the mountains, and where people and their horses and cows worked together to transport grasses, still exist today and are called the Kusa no Michi (Grass Paths). In just the small Ichinomiya area of Aso City along the northern foothills of the five peaks of Mount Aso, there are twenty-five of these paths following the cliffs. The accumulation of people’s constant efforts supported farming in the small towns. *Bonbanatori*, a custom in this region of picking flowers that bloom in the grasslands and offering them to the spirits of their ancestors is surely an expression of gratitude for the hard work of those who have gone before.

There are many species of fauna and plants unique to the Aso grasslands, including an endangered butterfly, the Oorurishijimi (Large Shijimi Blue). Among the approximately 600 species of plants that grow in the Aso grasslands are rare plants such as the perennial globe thistle which indicate that the Japanese islands were connected to the continent during the ice age. But why do so many plants grow here when the grasses are burned away with fire every year in spring? Sakamoto explains, “Unlike slash-and-burn techniques, the grass is not burned for long periods but is quickly burned away in a short time, meaning the soil temperature doesn’t really increase, and the roots and seeds of grasses are not affected by the burning.”

In recent years, however, it has become difficult to maintain the grasslands due to a shortage of people to take on farming and livestock work, and there are growing concerns about deterioration and reduction of the grasslands.

“To stop this from happening, there are currently sustainable initiatives underway to protect the grassland environment,” says Sakamoto. To maintain the cycle of burning, grazing and cutting, especially in pasturelands used for grazing livestock and gathering feed, grazing cattle from outside the region are being accepted, and work is also being done on an ownership system for Kumamoto Akaushi (Japanese Brown) cattle, a specialty of the Aso region and extremely popular as a healthy source of meat. In the past, experimental projects on biomass energy systems using wild grass as an energy source were conducted and eco-tours were held to enlighten visitors about the wonders of the grassland environment. Various activities to maintain the expansive grasslands in Aso, together with the rare nature and the culture connected with them, will continue to be carried out vigorously into the future. 



Burning off dead grass

Photo: kagawa zentsuji city



GI JAPAN PRODUCTS

Zentsujisan Shikakusuika

善通寺産四角スイカ

Cubic Watermelons

Zentsujisan Shikakusuika is a watermelon that has a cubic shape like a die, different from common round watermelons.

The skin of Zentsujisan Shikakusuika features neat, almost vertically aligned longitudinal stripes that impart a beautiful appearance.

With their unique cubic shape and beautiful appearance appreciated in the market, Zentsujisan Shikakusuika watermelons are traded at high prices, making them a representative specialty product of Zentsuji City, Kagawa Prefecture.

Only selected fruits with favorable growth are cultivated in a cubic container for molding and cultivating cucurbitaceous plants before fruits become large. The fruits are harvested at a proper timing so as not to cause scratches, etc. on the skin.

Fruits are sorted according to the Shipping Standard of Zentsujisan Shikakusuika. The standard includes the fruit weighing 5.5 to 8 kg and having almost vertically-aligned stripes on its skin, and only fruits meeting the standard are shipped as Zentsujisan Shikakusuika.

The development of Zentsujisan Shikakusuika was started around 1965 in Zentsuji City, where the warm climate with little rainfall is suitable for cultivating watermelons, with the aim of producing high-value-added watermelons.

Zentsujisan Shikakusuika watermelons are now produced by nine producers, with an annual shipment of around 500 watermelons as of fiscal 2018.



Text and images courtesy of Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries: <https://gi-act.maff.go.jp/en/register/entry/82.html>

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