

The Wealth of Nature: Agricultural Prosperity in Kawagoe

The foundation of Japan's modern agriculture was laid in Kawagoe in the Edo period (1603–1868).

The fields of the Musashino Plateau and the rich rice paddies along the Arakawa and Irumagawa Rivers are the treasures of our hometown.



Scenery around Shimomatsubara



Leaves and other materials are turned into compost over the course of about a year.

Enjoying the blessings of abundance in Kawagoe, one of the cities with the most farmland in the prefecture

It is generally flat from the center to the west of the Kanto Plain, with rice paddies along the Irumagawa River in the east and cultivated fields in the southwest.

During the Edo period, the wild Musashino Plateau was covered with a layer of Kanto loam, a red soil that was difficult to farm due to its low nutrient content and poor drainage. From 1694 to 1696, Yanagisawa Yoshiyasu, the lord of the domain, began to develop new rice paddies in Santome, and a new village called Santome Shinden was established. The original layout of the land developed by Yoshiyasu can still be seen today in Santome Shinden. It consists of around five hectares of house lots, farmland, and flatland forests divided into long rectangular strips 72 meters wide and roughly 675 meters deep. The flat land forests stop soil from flying off in strong winds, and its fallen leaves, mainly from deciduous broad-leaved trees such as oak, are used as compost, enabling circular agriculture with a low environmental impact. In 2017, the environmentally friendly agriculture practiced in the Santome area was recognized as a Japanese agricultural heritage under the name "Musashino Leaf Compost Farming Method." Today, sweet potatoes, spinach, taro, turnips, carrots, daikon, burdock, and other crops are grown in the area, making it one of the leading open-field production areas in Japan.

Rice paddies, on the other hand, are spread over a wide area of the city from the west to north. This includes the Kasumigaseki and Kasumigaseki Kita areas and the Naguwashi and Yamada areas in the Koazegawa River and Irumagawa River basins.



View of Kawagoe City from near Uwado Ryokuchi Green Space



Preparing spinach for shipping



Corn field

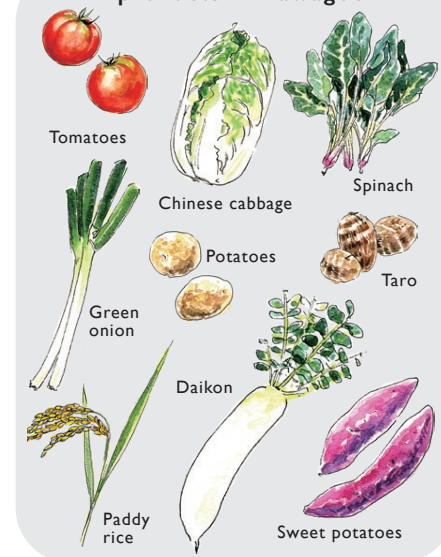
In the early modern period, ten merchant houses established in Kawagoe used local crops to produce products including soy sauce, confectioneries, and miso. In addition, as early as around 1653, they made somen noodles from wheat, which was widely grown in those days.

The area has also been blessed with a rich natural environment. Fireflies flew around here until the early 1960s, and the presence of fairy shrimp, which can only be found in well-maintained paddy fields, and *Ricciocarpus natans*, a plant designated as a near-threatened species, have been confirmed.

One of Saitama Prefecture's largest farm areas: Current state of agriculture and future challenges

Currently, there are 1,250 farming households and a cultivated area of 3,230 hectares (1,890 hectares of rice paddies and 1,340 hectares of fields) in the city of Kawagoe, making it one of the largest farm areas in the prefecture. The estimated agricultural output is approximately 7 billion yen, with veg-

High-yield agricultural products in Kawagoe



etables accounting for 4.6 billion yen, followed by rice, flowers, tubers, and fruits. Kawagoe's vegetables are highly valued for their quality, with chefs from restaurants in Tokyo coming to purchase them directly from farmers. Farming entities are dominated by rice farmers (917 entities) followed by vegetable farmers (427 entities) (see note).

While an increasing number of farmers in Kawagoe are struggling with succession problems, there are still many



Kawagoe fruit and vegetables market (circa 1904)



Farmers' market (2019)



Products made from local produce

who have been in business for more than a dozen generations, and the number of new farmers is also increasing.

Note: Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, "Graphs and Statistics on Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (Kawagoe City, Saitama Prefecture)" *Cultivated land area is from the 2021 Area Survey, total households from the 2020 Census, and all other data from the 2020 Census of Agriculture and Forestry.

Expanding Farmer Network: Connecting with Producers at Markets

At farmers' markets, consumers can purchase fresh local vegetables directly from the growers. There are also more opportunities for producers, restaurant owners, and food manufacturers to connect with each other, leading to many food-related collaborations, such as the development of special menus and sweets. Producers are also actively pursuing the so-called "sixth-order industry" (where primary industries such as agriculture and fisheries are involved in the secondary industry of food processing and the tertiary industry of distribution and sales) with products such as jams and dressings. Agricultural products produced in Kawagoe are enriching our diet and helping to realize environmentally friendly local production for local consumption.

The JA Cooperatives Direct Store Agresh Kawagoe, which sells local vegetables, cut flowers, and other fresh agricultural products delivered daily from local farmers, is popular among locals and tourists alike.

Kawagoe tea

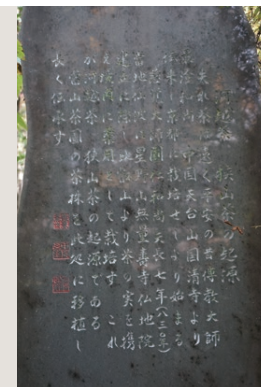
According to a monument at Nakain Temple on the history of Kawagoe Tea, the Buddhist priest Ennin brought tea plant seeds from Kyoto when he built a temple here in 830 and began to grow them on the temple grounds. The Kawagoe clan enjoyed drinking tea since the Kamakura period (1185–1333), leading to the spread of tea cultivation and production methods. In 1211, Eisai (1141–1215), the founder of the Rinzaï sect of Zen Buddhism, wrote Japan's first book on tea, in which he recorded its medicinal uses. A textbook from the period of the Northern and Southern Courts (1336–1392) mentioned "Musashi Kawagoe" as a tea production area.



Takabayashi tea processing machine (Hidaka City Board of Education)

In the mid-Edo period, sencha (steamed green leaf tea) from Uji became popular in Edo (present-day Tokyo), and Kawagoe tea, the root of the famed Sayama tea, was revived in the Sayama area in 1819. Tea cultivation rapidly expanded in

Monument at Nakain Temple



the area from the Sayama Hills to the Kaji Hills. Sayama's Uji-style production process was established and tea production flourished.

In 1884, Takabayashi Kenzo, a physician from present-day Hidaka City, invented tea processing machines for roasting, steaming, and rolling. In 1898, he perfected the Takabayashi tea-leaf rubbing machine, which brought about a major innovation in Japan's modern tea processing technology.

Sweet potato

In the Edo period, sweet potatoes produced in Kawagoe domain and adjacent villages were called "Kawagoe potatoes." In response to the Kyoho Famine that affected western Japan in 1732, Shogun Tokugawa Yoshimune ordered Aoki Konyo to cultivate sweet potatoes. After Konyo's trial cultivation, sweet potatoes spread throughout the Kanto region.

In 1751, Yoshida Yaemon sent for 200 seed potatoes from Shiizu Village (present-day Ichihara City, Chiba Prefecture), a leading sweet potato cultivation area at the time, and began growing them in the Kawagoe area. This was the beginning of the "Kawagoe potato," and sweet potato cultivation subsequently spread to neighboring villages.

The sweet potato became a subsistence crop for farmers and a hardy crop in case of famine.

Yaki-imo (baked sweet potato) shops appeared in Edo in the 1790s and yaki-imo quickly became popular. This was because yaki-imo was one of the few sweet foods available to the common people, and it was inexpensive and easy to obtain. Sweet potatoes produced in the Kawagoe area were valued for yaki-imo as "the real thing" because Kawagoe was relatively close to Edo and



transportation by boat on the Shingashigawa River was convenient.

In 1866, Akazawa Nihei from Imafuku in Kawagoe, began researching sweet potato cultivation methods. By the Meiji period (1868–1912), he had established a method that more than doubled the harvest.

Today, both Japanese and Western sweets made with sweet potatoes are popular in Kawagoe and many kinds are sold throughout the city.



Interview

profile

He runs Eda Poultry Farm in the Yoshino district. He is well versed in livestock farming in the Yoshino area and has succeeded in producing specialty eggs by improving the rearing environment and formulating more nutritious feed based on his own research. In the past, he served as vice president of the Kawagoe City Livestock Industry Promotion Council.

Eda Katsuo

Eda Poultry Farm

The “specialty eggs” produced by chickens raised on a diet of an original feed blend are extremely popular and often sell out quickly due to their delicious taste.

Successfully producing high quality eggs by adding value

“I was a company man before I started my poultry farm. My father was in the poultry farming business on the side at the time, so when I got married, I quit the company and started Eda Poultry Farm with my wife. This year marks 50 years since then.”

Originally, there were about 30 poultry farms in the Yoshino area, but the number has dwindled over the years to only Eda Poultry Farm today.

“About 20 years after we started our poultry farming business,” says Eda, “large corporate poultry farms that could raise millions of chickens began to dominate the market. At that time, we wondered how a local poultry farm like ours could compete with them. We decided to sell our eggs directly rather than through wholesalers.”

However, when they first started selling eggs on their own, they also faced the challenge of figuring out how to get more people to buy them.

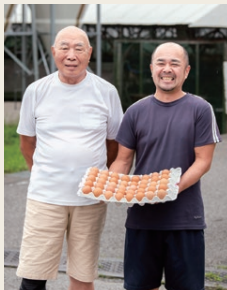
“We carefully reviewed everything, starting with our feed, and came up with the idea of selling ‘specialty eggs’ (eggs that contain high levels of specific nutrients or have other values sought by consumers, such as being particular about breeding methods or feed ingredients). At that time, there were no poultry farms producing specialty eggs; the mainstream approach was to ship out as many eggs as possible.

But I decided to compete on the quality of our eggs.”

Eda Poultry Farm has many repeat customers, mainly from the local Kawagoe area, who come to the farm for these specialty eggs. Eda Poultry Farm’s eggs have a rich yolk and full flavor. They are highly sought after by many restaurants, including those in the city, and they are popular as safe and fresh local eggs.

Currently, the poultry business is being run primarily by Eda’s son, and Eda says, “We would like to increase our sales volume of eggs while keeping things the way they are.”

As a farmer, Eda has high hopes for Kawagoe’s future, saying, “I hope that more people will take over farming and that the environment will allow livestock farmers to stay in business in the future.”



We provide eggs that you can tell are delicious just by their appearance.

A long-established farm that grows sweet potatoes, a specialty of Kawagoe

“In 1954, just after the war, leisure was still almost nonexistent,” says Sakamoto Hiroyuki. “It was at that time that my father started a sweet potato harvesting experience in Kawagoe. It gradually spread by word of mouth, and around 1960, it was drawing attention as kind of hands-on tourism in Kawagoe.”



When the leaves turn yellow, it’s time to harvest.

While growing sweet potatoes to ship to the market, the farm offered a sweet potato harvesting experience. This caught the eye of a kindergarten teacher, who thought that it would be a good educational experience for the children. Around 1965, digging for sweet potatoes became one of Kawagoe’s main agricultural experiences.

Many customers still come seeking not only the experience but also the delicious sweet potatoes themselves. Sakamoto delivers his carefully grown sweet potatoes to many people through the sweet potato harvesting experience, direct sales, and long-distance shipping.

In addition, until the late 1960s/early 1970s, there were two varieties of sweet potatoes grown in Kawagoe: the Beniko variety and the Beni-Aka variety. As time passed, however, new varieties appeared.

“In the late 1970s/early 1980s, the high-yield Beni Azuma variety was introduced, and in the Heisei era (1989–2019), varieties such as Silk Sweet and Beni Haruka, which have a delicate sweetness, increased.”

People in agriculture must constantly adopt and study different techniques in response to changing times and environments.

“Despite the challenges such as the impact of soaring production costs, we will continue to do our best in Kawagoe while responding to the needs of the times,” said Sakamoto.

Sakamoto Hiroyuki

Sakamoto Farm

Sweet potatoes, which prefer acidic soil, were a crop suited to the land in Kawagoe. Sakamoto Farm supports agriculture in Kawagoe by adapting to the needs of the times.

Interview

profile

He is the son of Sakamoto Naga-haru, who started potato harvesting tourism in 1954. He took over the pick-your-own potatoes farm from his father and now runs Sakamoto Farm. He was a member of the Kawagoe City Agricultural Committee, and in 2008, he founded the Kawagoe Imo Kenkyukai, a group of farmers who run tourist farms in the city, and served as its president.

