

‘Towards the 21st Century’ Revisited <Part 2>

Universal agriculture - agricultural and welfare collaboration through connecting local resources

"Universal" can be interpreted as meaning "all-round", "for everyone", and "anyone can do it". It was with this in mind that a project launched to create an all inclusive comfortable community embracing everybody, young, old, differently abled etc. in mutually supportive agricultural activities to increase everybody's welfare was called "Universal Agriculture".

In Japan's agricultural sector, an aging farming population, a declining number of farm workers, and an increase in abandoned farmland have become pressing issues in recent years. At the same time there are people with disabilities and the elderly who seek greater social participation and employment opportunities (cash income). Addressing these issues by combining them in "agricultural and welfare collaboration" has the potential to prove a happy solution that creates a mutually and self-supportive community in declining rural districts.

We started this community-based activity in 2018 in Fukuroi city, Shizuoka, as a trial in a new agriculture-welfare partnership activity supported by the local Collaborative Community Development Center. For project purposes we rented farms and greenhouses from farmers near facilities catering to people with disabilities. The farms were cultivating grapes, indigo, shiitake mushroom, etc. and grapes and mushroom remain our important cash crops. Manufacturing indigo dyes through the entire process of growing, processing and marketing is an agricultural diversification strategy.

So far, a cultivation system based on four major crops has been established based on grapes, indigo, mushroom, and Senryo (*Sarcandra glabra*). These crops are a well-balanced combination taking into consideration the seasonality and challenges in cultivation management. A small amount of cash income has been earned by selling grapes and Senryo, and was paid as wages to the disabled people who participated in the farming work, which was a remarkable and important step for the agricultural and welfare collaboration activities.

Various agricultural activities at the Universal Farm are carried out in cooperation with a "Support Team" comprised of volunteers.. The project has the additional benefit of counteracting the decline in local farming by bringing grapes cultivation back to a discarded greenhouse and continuing a Senryo field which had no owners to succeed and maintain it.

To date, the Universal Agriculture Foundation has made progress and we would like to expand our activities not only in the existing Universal Farm site, but also roll out the concept to nearby farmers and abandoned farmlands, and to connect with people in the area who are interested in embracing activities that extend the Universal Agriculture concept in the region. Furthermore, an intermediary organization will be established in order to connect "agriculture" and "welfare" and to support the development of Universal Agriculture in the region.

We hope to create a credible and practical system in the region to realize a triple-win network providing benefits for, "agriculture," "welfare" and "local community" through the practice of Universal Agriculture. The time is changing from "global" to "regional." We believe that community-based activities rooted in the local community will become more and more important!



Indigo dyeing



Vineyard in the universal farm



Implanting shiitake mushroom



Harvesting Senryo