

Farm visiting reports <Part 5>

The Small Farm, Sakura (2)

Continuing from the previous issue, this article introduces “The Small Farm, Sakura” which practices pesticide-free and chemical-free agriculture in Sakura City, Chiba Prefecture. As reported in the previous issue, we visited the farm on August 25, 2023, to experience harvesting rice.

Rice paddy harvested by combine harvesters is transferred to a dryer in the barn, where it is dried overnight to a moisture content of 15%. The paddy is then immediately hulled to make brown rice, which is packed in 30 kg bags for low-temperature storage. The Brown rice produced is subjected to an agricultural inspection. The inspection classifies the brown rice as 1st, 2nd, or 3rd grade according to appearance, which affects the price of rice. There is concern that pesticide-free cultivation will result in an increase in rice spots caused by stink bugs, which will lower the grade of the rice, but the brown rice from “the small farms” usually passes the first grade without problems. There are two reasons for this. First, the timing of rice cultivation is synchronized with that of surrounding rice fields, so that the heading dates of panicles are uniform and damage on the grains is not concentrated in a single field. The second reason is that even when rice is damaged, the brown rice is sorted using a 1.9 mm sieve, 0.1 mm larger than normal, to sift out damaged or immature brown rice grain that is slightly smaller size than the normal size of brown rice grain.

The brown rice that has been sifted out is sorted again with a regular 1.8 mm sieve and sold as “Value packed rice”. The high percentage of unripe green rice in the value packed rice makes it softer and more tender when it is cooked and it is recommended to the customers who purchase brown rice. Cold-stored brown rice is sold as brown rice or milled and vacuum-packed in small packages, depending on the order.

The farm's rice production usually ranges from 3 to 3.5 tons in terms of brown rice. While yields are high in the well-developed paddy fields on the plains, yields are low in the rice fields in the valleys, which are called “yatsuda”, despite the time and effort required to cultivate and manage them. Mr. Ogawa, the owner of the farm, believes that the current production volume is just right, although improving the productivity of the “yatsuda” is an issue. The amount of effort spent on cultivation is inversely

proportional to the amount of effort spent on sales promotion. If he spends more time on production, production will increase, but rice will remain unsold, and if he spends more time on sales, he will not be able to grow enough rice and production will decrease. In the past, he had expanded his paddy rice cultivation area by being commissioned to manage a neighbor's paddy field, but he became so busy managing the cultivation and sales that he gave up vegetable cultivation and continued to eat vegetables from the supermarket, which he did not find tasty and did not enjoy his life. Therefore, from the following year, he refused to accept consignment cultivation. Since then, he has settled down to his current production level.

The sales channel for rice has become more stable, with direct sales to individual customers spreading by word of mouth, as well as the recent acquisition of a major customer. Vegetable sales are not large; at one time the farm sold vegetables wholesale to retailers, but now they are mainly sold at an unmanned direct sales stand set up in the fields. In addition, there are opportunities to participate in events to display and sell rice, vegetables, processed products, etc., but the volume of sales is not large. Mr. Ogawa feels that events are rather valuable as a place to meet people than a market channel.

He has been working on his farm based on the hypothesis that “the symbiosis between small creatures and crops will bring healthy, delicious, and vigorous harvests”. He “Yatsuda” in the small farm says that while he feels a sense of accomplishment in his activities, he also sometimes feels the limitations of his small individual efforts. However, when he meets people who are tackling environmental and agricultural issues in his neighborhood at local events, or when he comes into contact with the FAO's “Decade of Family Farming,” which has become a hot topic in recent years, or with concepts such as “agroecology” and “holistic agriculture,” he is encouraged to realize that there are people around him and around the world who are working with the same awareness of the issues.

