

# AAINews

**APPROPRIATE AGRICULTURE INTERNATIONAL  
CO., LTD**

1-2-3-403 Haramachida, Machida, Tokyo, 194-0013 JAPAN.

TEL/FAX:+81-42-725-6250 Email: aai@koushu.co.jp

## Lessons From a Tiny Plot of Farmland

Today is the day of the long-awaited autumn harvest. Look at all the smiles and the bunches of groundnuts! We had a rich harvest of groundnuts! The pleasure of harvest is common all over the world, in developing and developed countries, and for young and old. Such pleasure can be fully enjoyed even on such a tiny farm as ours in the middle of Tokyo.

AAI is renting a plot of public farmland some 15 minute's cycle ride from the office. The area covered by the plot is only 30 m<sup>2</sup>. Why does the company rent a farm? For the sake of self-sufficiency? No. To contribute to the company's sales by marketing vegetables? No way! There are different reasons. Although AAI is involved in projects related to agriculture, the staff members have few occasions throughout the year to go into the field and actually work with soil. Then can AAI still be called an agricultural consulting firm? Is desk work all that AAI does? This feeling was one motivating factor behind the establishment of our farm. A second reason is to practice the production of food by ourselves and not to forget the meaningfulness, laboriousness and importance of growing vegetables and cereals throughout the year no matter how small the scale of the operation. The third reason is that by having a working field we hope that we can try out and think of many new things there. These ideas had been in our mind for a long time, and with a call, "Let's move our own hands first," we started working on this tiny farm.



The primary concept of this farm of ours is "Achieving biological diversity without plowing, chemical fertilizers and pesticides through organic farming." Thus we tried a sort of permaculture to start with. Or to be more precise, the farm was first very loosely managed partly due to the difficulty of looking after the farm on a daily basis. "Loose" here means rough weeding above the ground without rooting out. This is done for the purpose of increasing the ratio of green coverage, preventing soil erosion and inviting insects. Have you ever heard of the word "bio-pore"? Tube-shaped hollows created by organisms, such as earthworms and the space left after the death/decomposition of plant roots, are called bio-pores. With a no-plowing cultivation approach they do not get destroyed and can extend underground deeper than plowing machines can reach. It is thought that bio-pores play important roles such as increasing the ventilation and drainage capacities of the soil and helping new roots grow deep. Experiment on permaculture and mixed planting even as small as 30 m<sup>2</sup>, is not that easy. In Japan, with its moist and temperate climate, the period from spring to autumn is a constant battle with weeds, while at the same time worrying about adjacent neighboring farms. Our hopes of harvesting vegetables in the first summer, though, were dashed. With the exception of sorghum, okra, cow peas and groundnuts, the other vegetables such as tomatoes, eggplants, zucchinis, pumpkins and corn etc. ended up in disaster. Plants are very honest. Without sufficient soil preparation it is natural that the farm cannot yield a good harvest. We could be proud of the larger green coverage and the number of insects compared to other farm plots, but, this said, we had to spend day after day rough weeding and preventing insect damage.

While working on this tiny plot of farmland, many thoughts come to mind; the problem of cereal import/export and the policy of curtailing paddy fields; Japan's low food self-sufficiency; the Westernization of our food



culture; organic farming, etc. For the past six months what has the farm given to us? What can we learn and conclude from the work at the farm? How should we make use of and present the lessons taught by the farm? For some it might sound like an exaggeration, but this "tiny farm" is a very meaningful plot. From this farm we are trying to harvest something more than just vegetables. But, more than any other reason, is it also possible that working on the farm is more fun than working at a desk in the office? I wonder what we can expect for the next winter harvest. Will we be able to verify the bio-pore functions?

(By Fuyuki Kojima in Tokyo, October 1999)