

Mini-Series: Vegetable farming in Oman (2)

Part 2: Vegetable farming in Salalah

Salalah is the second largest city in Oman, located in the Dhofar region in the southern part of the country. Furthermore it is in one of the most traditional agricultural regions of the country, the other being the Batina coastal region. From July to September the area is blessed with regular rainfall brought by the monsoon, allowing the mountain range behind Salalah to store up water from the rain and mist. The water flows down underground, and is pumped up to be used for irrigation. The area is too wet to grow date palms, which are known as a speciality of Oman, but coconuts and bananas are grown here.

The farms here are multi-stories: under coconuts, bananas and papayas are grown while vegetables and pasturage are planted at the lowest level of the field. The vegetables grown here include cabbage, cauliflower, tomato, melon, watermelon, bitter gourds, cucumber, radish and French beans etc. Here people eat the leaves rather than the roots of radish, thus the root parts of radish grown here are much smaller than those found in Japan. In addition, the farming method in this traditional agricultural area is rather unique. For example, pruned coconut branches and leaves are reused as a mulch to prevent evaporation from the ground. They also serve as a mat for other fruits and vegetables which would be vulnerable to pests and blights if directly exposed to the ground. In addition, coconut branches stripped of leaves are used as supports for French beans. In order to make full use of irrigation water, vegetables are planted right next to the watercourses.

Let us move on now to the management aspect of the farms in this area. The farm laborers are immigrant workers from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh etc. The landowners are Oman nationals, but they are barely engaged in the actual farming themselves. The types of immigrant worker employment are:

- 1) Employed by the landowner with monthly payment (R.O.70-75 /m, R.O.1 = JPY 300)
- 2) Rent farmland (e.g. R.O. 120 / m for 5 acres)
- 3) Divide turnover from the farm between the landowner and laborers (on a 50:50 basis)

We visited farms run along the different management styles described above, and found that farms managed under styles 2) and 3) are far better treated and maintained. Under management styles 2) and 3), the laborers seem to work harder, as the productivity of their farm is directly linked to the laborers income. In one of the farms under management style 2) that we visited, a Pakistani farmer and his son were working on their rented 5-acre plot of land, out of which 4 acres were used for growing vegetables and 1 acre for growing bananas. The father and the son were working with intimate teamwork. Such a scene has become rare in today's Japan where agriculture is mechanized and there is a consistent lack of successors.

However, in this area some problems are emerging recently, such as the frequent use of chemical fertilizers, the lowering quality of ground water due to over-pumping, lowering of the water table and mixing with sea water caused by modernized pasturage farming which uses center-pivot irrigation. One of the main causes of these problems may be attributed to the fact that most of the workers on the farms are foreigners. That is, they are interested in the present productivity and have very little awareness or concern over the future management of the land and little sense of crisis about the lowering quality of the irrigation water. Today there is a movement of so-called Omanisation, which tries to promote the employment of Oman nationals rather than foreign laborers, but such a policy has not reached to agricultural workers as yet. We hope that the day will come soon when people in Oman themselves will start working in their own farms.



Radishes planted next to watercourses



French bean cultivation using coconut branch supports



Pakistani father and son working in the farm