

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 Farm Continued

What our staff holding in his hands in the photo is a bunch of radishes called “Ofukuro” in Japanese. The word means Mom and these vegetables are ideal for making oden, the Japanese hodgepodge dish. If you recall, in AAINews Vol. 26 I reported about a tiny block of farmland AAI rented for farming practice. The project is still going on. It was started with the idea of nurturing rich biological diversity by organic farming with no ploughing, no fertilizers and pesticides, and with no priority being placed on productivity. This basic philosophy remains in place. However, some argued that there should be a certain amount of harvest we could enjoy, and also that it would be interesting to compare ploughed and non-ploughed farms. Accordingly, last year we ploughed a half of the little plot and left the other half untouched, though both remained organic with no chemicals used. The last summer’s harvest from the non-ploughed plot included French beans, mulukhiya, and cherry tomatoes. Ground cucumbers were also successful deep under the grass. As we ploughed the other half of the plot, it was very tempting to start weeding this wild unploughed plot as well. Suppressing such temptation, we have kept the half of the plot unploughed for two years, though of course we did a little trimming to some extent. As a result, the ground of the unploughed half has become very soft, offering earthy comfort for those who walk on it, and it hosts a lot of insects.



For almost two years we have tried to learn something through this tiny, 9.09-tsubo (approx. 30-m²) plot of farmland; something more than the mere enjoyment of working with the soil and harvesting. Some people argued disapprovingly saying, “What on earth do you expect to learn or understand from such a tiny piece of farmland? What a big mouth, what arrogance! The work of real farmers who have to struggle every day of their lives is nothing comparable.” That is true, and we appreciate such comments. I dare say, however, that the whole point for us to have this farm is to create opportunities to feel and contemplate something through the work with the soil, in which we can engage ourselves only as a sideline of our everyday work as agricultural development consultants.

After all, humans are animals. It is natural for us animals to go insane if we remain deprived of nature, and to feel relieved in natural surroundings. Therefore, it may be quite understandable that humans whether grown-ups or children, go mad if they constantly remain in an unnatural environment. We after all cannot live away from soil. What we eat on a daily basis - rice, bread, vegetables, meat, fish - all comes from, and returns, to soil. Today, the self-sufficiency of Japan’s cereal supply is less than 30%. Japan buys a great amount of foodstuffs from abroad with the money she earns by exporting industrial goods. In supermarkets and convenience stores polished, good-looking vegetables are lined up side by side, and one can buy any of them with money. Food is not an industrial product, though. Have people forgotten that food is grown with the blessing of soil, water and the sun? Have they forgotten the joy of growing crops and appreciating the real tastes of food? Do they ever think carefully, while enjoying food, how it was made or harvested? Have they lost the sense of appreciation engraved in the phrases “Itadakimasu” and “Gochiso sama”? Are they taking it for granted that any foodstuff can be purchased and enjoyed with money? Has anyone in this country recently experienced desperate hunger, one of the five major desires

that humans possess? Do we ever walk on soil while traveling between home and work? Can we Japanese survive only by letting children use computers for so-called IT education, instead of ploughs? These questions make me feel like cooking oden with radish for today’s dinner.

(By Fuyuki Kojima, Machida City, Tokyo, February, 2001)



In Search of the Blue Bird. What is that you've been longing for?

Part 3: Improvement of agricultural local life and growth of local industries

“Uncle, can you give me your blue bird?”

“Sure. But it cannot bear the boisterous life of the lay world, and I cannot guarantee nothing would happen then.”

In Japan, due to the country's steep topography, the acreage of land available for farming is inevitably small, leading to higher production costs. On the other hand, many other countries capable of mono-cultural cultivation on large acreages of farmland are producing huge quantities of agricultural products and exporting them at low costs. Japanese consumers have opted for such imported products because of their cheap prices. However, thanks to the increasing environmental and health concerns in recent years, the consumers are seeking “safe” products rather than merely “cheap” ones. Foreseeing such change in the consumer's attitude, in a farming area in Japan some people are trying to promote their locality as well as the health of the local people by introducing “organic farming” to raise additional values to their agricultural products.



An earlier mayor of Aya, a town known for its forestry industry, apparently surprised the local people by objecting to the felling of trees. Aya is a small town located in central Miyazaki Prefecture, with a population of some 7,000. In this agricultural town with 30% of its residents engaged in farming today, “natural ecosystem agriculture” is being promoted under the initiative of the town's authorities. Earlier, in Aya, horticultural therapy was started following the promotion of small organic farms for the sake of the health improvement of the local people, especially senior residents. This activity has expanded since then and led to the establishment of an organic farming development centre, the development of the town's original standards for certifying organic agricultural products, the construction of an organic compost plant, and the expansion of the marketing of organic products, etc. Moreover, apart from organic farming, Aya is undertaking other town promotion schemes using natural resources, such as tourism development with the local natural broad-leaf forests as an attraction, wood carving, textile dyeing, brewing and so on. Consequently Aya's town promotion, by combining organic farming with other schemes, is known widely throughout the country.

The compost plant produces organic composts using household waste, and a number of farms in and around Aya display certificates of organic farming approved by the town. In the fields green manure mixed farming of sesbania and milk vetches is practiced, while ducks contribute to weeding in the paddy fields. It is said that already 70% of the town's farmers are practicing organic farming. On the other hand, the streets of Aya are kept neat and there stand many signboards indicating key facilities of the town. People come to fetch drinking water from a pond next to the stalls in the centre of the town which sell organic products and local foodstuff. Such scenery of the town's daily life makes us bystanders sense some sort of satisfaction which cannot be felt in urban cities.

Thus, Aya has made great efforts for rural agricultural development by creating additional values to agricultural products, foreseeing consumers' needs and expanding its own marketing routes / methods. This has been achieved by making full use of the natural environment and other unique characteristics of the locality, and by creating a system to help improve the local people's lifestyle. This challenge of Aya Town can be referred to as one example of positive rural development whether in or outside Japan.

The influx of cheap agricultural products from overseas may be spoiling the prospect of lifestyle improvement in farming areas, leaving many farmlands unattended and deserted and decreasing the natural self-supporting and nurturing capacity of farmlands and forestry areas. We must seriously question the plausibility of the idea that only a supremacist monetary economy and higher economic efficiency with maximum productivity can bring happiness to people.



Stalls selling organic products



Paddy field certified for organic farming



Spring in central Aya (where local people come and fetch drinking water)

Agricultural extension and training for agricultural extension agents in Syria

Part 3: Agricultural extension agents training in Syria

This page in the previous issue reported on the Directorate of Agricultural Extension of Syria's Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform. The training for their agricultural extension agents is undertaken by the Department of Training and Qualification (DTQ). This department is divided into two sections, one in charge of "in-service training" for agricultural extension agents employed by the government and the others in charge of "pre-service training" for students of agricultural high schools and vocational schools (training for students studying agriculture at university is the responsibility of the Ministry of Higher Education.) The department has five national training centers: two agricultural extension training centers in Damascus, two agricultural machinery training centers in Dara and Aleppo, and one stockbreeding training center in Homs. In addition there are training sections attached to agricultural departments at the provincial level, conducting various types of training within the respective provinces. The number of training courses conducted under the DTQ during the year 2000 both at the national and provincial levels was 2,155 in total, and the number of trainees amounted to a total of 41,220 people:- 14,350 extension agents; 20,790 farmers; 6,080 students. The wide range of the training themes include general agricultural expansion, rural life improvement, crop cultivation, fruit cultivation, stockbreeding, forestry, environmental conservation, irrigation, agricultural machinery, bee-keeping, and computing. The maximum number of trainees at each course is set at twenty, and the duration of courses can vary from one week to one month.

Apart from those provided by the Syrian central or local governments, there are some training programmes conducted by international organizations. Currently the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) is carrying out five projects of regional agricultural development, and one of their project components is the improvement of agricultural extension activities and training for agricultural extension agents and farmers. Also, FAO has been conducting a project for organizational empowerment regarding agricultural policy planning and analysis since 1998, and another TOT (training of trainers) project to upgrade the quality of trainers of agricultural extension agents since 1999.

We discussed in the previous issue how the Directorate of Agricultural Extension is well structured as an organization, and similarly the training courses for agricultural extension agents are well formed with a good variety of subjects. If these courses could live up to the initial expectations, they would contribute greatly to the development and problem solving of Syria's agriculture. In reality, however, the training efforts have not proved so successful. Why? The following are some of the reasons:

1) Means as the objective: DTQ tends to be satisfied with the mere execution of training courses, and to care less about the contents and results of their own training than about figures, such as the number of courses run and that of participants per year. The head of DTQ also tends to request donors to supply material or financial support (as opposed to technical assistance), under the pretext of conducting new training courses with new technologies and information.

2) Prevalence of "incentives": In Syria it is a common practice to provide so-called "incentives", namely a daily allowance for participants on various training courses. Officially the purpose behind this is to encourage more participation and thus increase the effect of the training. However, increasingly this incentive is making the training itself a dead letter, giving the contents of the training secondary or even less importance.

3) Lack of needs assessment: At the beginning of every year, DTQ draws up an annual plan, according to which it conducts various types of training. However, in many cases the same training courses are repeated year after year simply because they have been conducted in previous years, without assessing whether every and each project is required and necessary.

Apart from these main drawbacks, there are other problems such as that trainees cannot gain practical skills since the contents of the courses are not practical comprising mostly lectures and with few opportunities for field work, and that there is too much emphasis on the appearance and the show of the training. This latter point can be seen as a fundamental problem leading to the above three major problems, and also it is a common feature not only in terms of agricultural training but also in various aspects of Syrian society in general.



Training for farmers



Training regarding olive cultivation

Mini-Series: Permaculture Element Technology (2)

Part 2: Effective use of water resources and structures

This page in the previous issue discussed comprehensive planning of permaculture with a good overview of the landscape including the energy flows such as sunshine, air, wind and water. This time we would like to discuss one example of collection and utilization of one of the energy sources, namely water, in a process called “water harvest”. Also below we report on a method of environmental mitigation by the use of some additional structures attached to the site’s main constructions.

Water for human use can be obtained from rainwater flowing on the ground, from groundwater (through wells), and from springs, rivers and so forth. One way of effective water use is to make the most of natural slopes existing between the water sources and the final destination of reservoirs, allowing the water to run down in many ways at the mercy of gravitational forces. For this method, diversion channels (slightly sloped ditches to guide the water in certain directions) and water pipes are used to lead the water to reservoirs. The watercourse shown in Photo 1 is not for straight collection and delivery of seasonal rainwater to the reservoir, but it is used to guide water gradually to the final destination with many small dams built along the watercourse. Water stops, stays and gathers in each dam, and the overflow moves to the next dam, till it reaches the final reservoir. Part of the water stopped at each dam slowly seeps into the ground, keeping the soil moist as well as the air moist. The water gathered in reservoirs is used for drinking by humans during the dry season, and in grazing areas it is used as drinking water for cattle as well as for wild animals.



Photo 1: Diversion channel



Photo 2: Water tank made of galvanized iron sheet

Another popular method of water harvest is to collect rainwater direct from roofs and deposit it into water tanks. Water tanks can be made from various materials, such as galvanized iron sheets (Photo 2), concrete, bricks covered with mortar, wood, clay, etc. It is also possible to harvest water directly from lakes, wadis (dry river beds), or from underground, with the help of water pumps.

As for constructed objects, appropriate and effective use of additional structures around a housing complex such as mounds, greenhouses, fences, walls, pergolas etc. can help efficient energy use, by making the wind and temperature milder. A condition for effective house design is to harmonize the house with the natural energy sources such as sunshine, wind and rainfall, as well as the surrounding vegetation. It is important to place and design a house in accordance with the micro climate and environment, and just having some ivy overlooking the lawns, roof or walls and lattice trellises on the side of the house helps create a separate space for environmental mitigation and acts as a windbreak. Greenhouses and shade houses can serve for food production as well as for air-conditioning. Mounds have the effect of heat prevention, wind breaking and soundproofing, while groves also work as windbreakers. In any case, the whole point is to maximize efficacy of energy use by appropriate placing and designing of the structures within the targeted plot, and to control various climatic elements in the entire plot.

