

## ***Mini-Series: Work and life in farms - Various movements in Japan***

### **Part 3: ‘Shizen-Nou’ (Natural Farming) and Ogawa Town’s Challenge to Cyclic Farming**

Lately I took part in the rice nursery building activity organized by “Shizen-nou manabi-no-kai (natural farming study group) Okayama.” Following Mr. Yoshikazu Kawaguchi, the natural farming practitioner, this group aims at learning and promoting the natural farming method. “Shizen-nou” (natural farming) is a farming method started by Mr. Kawaguchi when he fell ill due to agro-chemicals. This method tries to follow the order of nature by not eliminating weeds and insects purposefully and resorting to no fertilizer, agro-chemicals and ploughing (though mowing is ok). Mr. Kawaguchi has practiced this method for over two decades (after two decades of being engaged in modern farming earlier). Here ‘natural’ does not imply simple gathering nor untended cultivation, but it is a farming method which does intervene with nature unless necessity dictates. Five days before my visit, Mr. Kawaguchi had conducted a demonstration, instruction and lecture on paddy preparation and rice cultivation for 120 participants. It is their fifth year of practicing natural farming on the rented paddy field of 0.1 ha. With their non-ploughing scheme they remove the naturally grown grasses first, then place rice seedlings on the soil, before planting the grasses back on the soil. I would not say that this is the perfect method under any conditions. However, as one of the creatures relying on Mother Nature for our livelihood, we human beings cannot say “100% Yes” when asked whether it is 100% right to resort to such types of agricultural method which controls crops with agro-chemicals. Apart from this group there are over 20 places across Japan where natural farming is being taught and promoted, and also there are farmers who practice this method of farming.

Ogawa Town lies in the centre of Saitama Prefecture, next to Chichibu Mountain Range in the west. It used to be a major production site for hand-made Japanese paper, which was a local traditional craft. Some 20 farmers in this town, including Mr. Yoshinori Kaneko, who has been practicing organic farming since 1971 and those who have learned under his guidance, form “Ogawa Town Organic Farming (Production) Group”. The group has been trying cyclic farming. This time I took part in their “open day”, which they hold on the second Saturday of every month to publicize the town’s cyclic farming-related activities and techniques to outsiders. Apart from the local food self-sufficiency through collaboration between organic farmers and consumers, the activities that this group are carrying out include (i) weeding of paddy fields using *Aigamo* ducks, (ii) production of compost from fallen leaves collected from nearby settlements, (iii) production of natural eggs from free-range poultry breeding, (iv) home raising of rice seedlings and seedling exchange events, (v) production of cereals other than rice, (vi) well digging by the “Kazusa-bori” method, (vii) various attempts to achieve energy self-sufficiency under the initiative of the NPO “Ogawa-machi fuudo katsuyou centre (Ogawa town landscape centre)”, such as: bio-gas system (technology to produce methane gas (i.e. fuel) and anaerobic fermented liquid fertilizer (i.e. organic fertilizer) from organic matters such as excretions of livestock or remnants of agricultural products.); vegetable diesel fuel (VDF): alternative fuel for diesel engines made from waste oil from cooking (tempura making), which emits only one third of the black smoke compared with that produced by real diesel, and no NOx; greenhouses using timber derived from selective logging; charcoal making; use of firewood stoves; collaboration with local industries to process locally grown organic products to produce local specialty agricultural products (e.g. sake, dry noodles), etc. The local government of Ogawa Town is very supportive of these activities. It provides the infrastructure cost of biogas plants and also helps collect kitchen garbage for organic fertilizer production from some 60 households.

Before the 1960s, when farmers used to keep livestock even on tiny farms and the primary industry including self-sufficient small-scale farming-cum-stockbreeding was still the main industry of the country, the society was self-sustaining and sustainable with materials naturally flowing and circulating without waste. Those days passed and agriculture became modernized with the introduction of farming machines, chemical fertilizers and agro-chemicals, and this new style of agriculture has become the norm today. However, the above attempts trying to go back to natural ways of farming seem to suggest that our future depends on such sustainable cyclic farming in harmony with nature, with a minimum use of modern artificial devices.



**Rice nursery making in natural farming**



**Running the tractor using vegetable diesel fuel**



**Bio-gas & liquid fertilizer tank**