

AAINews

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Never Let Consumers Down: visiting the organic farm of an ex-AAI staff member

Our friend Mr. Iiyama lives in Ushimado-cho, the part of Okayama Prefecture that faces the Inland Sea of Japan. He used to work with us at AAI, but he left the company in order to become an organic farmer and contribute to improving food security and safety. Two years have passed since he started farming in Ushimado-cho. His rented farmland is scattered on hilltops and hillsides, some five minutes drive from his house. They are in total one hectare of rented land. He uses the land by rotation, with 6-7 tan (1.5-1.7 acres) used for vegetable cultivation and the rest being left fallow till the next farming season.

No agrochemicals are employed and only organic fertilizers are used in Mr. Iiyama's farm. When I visited there were some ten kinds of vegetables and pulses, such as carrots, eggplants and soybeans. It seems rather many for such small-scale farming, but somehow he manages to sell the products to his customers with whom he has a direct contract. Right after harvesting in the morning he sends or delivers his vegetables not only to individual customers but also to road stations and organic food stores, as well as some delis. Along with vegetables lots of weeds grow in his farm. In fact the eggplants looked to be competing (co-existing?) with weeds. His vegetables did not look as fancy as those on sale in ordinary supermarkets. They had wormholes and rough-looking leaves. However, when I ate some of them for dinner that day, they tasted really good, and when cooked they looked perfectly the same as dishes cooked with supermarket products. The most tedious part of organic farming is weeding and pest prevention (that is, picking off pest insects manually). Ploughing, sowing, fertilizing and harvesting aren't so time-consuming. It also gets labour-intensive at the time of unfavourable weather (like typhoons and droughts), raising seedling, as well as right after the planting.

There are only four organic farmers in this area including Mr. Iiyama, and all of them came from outside. To the organic farmers' dismay, local young farmers show even less understanding and support to organic farming than their grandfathers. Mr. Iiyama doesn't want the young local farmers to see him and other organic farmers and conclude that organic farming is not financially viable. In order to gain their understanding, Mr. Iiyama thinks that the organic farmers need to demonstrate for themselves that organic farming can sustain itself as established business. He strongly believes that, if it proves itself as stable business, organic farming can have convincing appeal as a viable business alternative, which may in turn lead to reforming of the wider agriculture practice of the locality.

Mr. Iiyama said, "Financially, it is still very difficult. This year we were hit by typhoons one after another, and the pest damage was devastating. As a result we could not grow seedlings and crops as much as we wanted. Some customers even said we could use agrochemicals if in a small quantity. But some other customers of mine are allergic to chemical substances and I would never betray their trust." According to him, it would take at least five years before the business takes off properly, but he sees the coming year as a crucial year for financial stability. He plans to expand his farming by starting rice and poultry farming, and by cyclic (thus more economical) utilization of organic fertilizers. At the same time, he will try to gain the trust and understanding of the local young farmers for organic farming. It is also his strong belief that if people's food consciousness could be changed somehow, for instance in favour of reducing waste food and preferring seasonal products, Japan's food self-sufficiency could be improved even with organic fertilizers and no agrochemicals. Our discussion continued well into the night, with a sense of urgency as we talked about the current situation of food production (excessive inputs and year-round supply) and consumption (which is hugely wasteful) and the uncontrolled import of cheap agricultural products from overseas. But in the early morning he went off for harvesting and delivery as usual.



Mr. Iiyama's active farmland



Washing dirt off the fresh vegetables



Now the time for the delivery round

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