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The Sweet Potato – a Japanese Favorite

Autumn is harvest season, a time to treat the palate to some delicious seasonal food. One such food is the sweet potato, of which Japanese people are especially fond. It is said to have been introduced to Japan from China in 1597 through Miyako Island (see "Challenging Region" on page 35). From there, it spread northward to Kyushu, the southernmost of Japan's four main islands where it became widely cultivated since it easily grows even in poor soil. During the great famine of 1732-1733, there were reputedly no starvation deaths among the Satsuma and Nagasaki clans that grew sweet potatoes, prompting the Tokugawa *Shogunate* in Edo, now Tokyo, to encourage the growing of sweet potatoes throughout the land.

As the author of "Rice & the Japanese" (page 43) points out, in the food-scarce postwar years when rice was in short supply, people alleviated their hunger by eating sweet potatoes. The crop's popular appeal was such that it did not stop short of being used simply as a replacement staple for rice.

Globally, sweet potato production is thriving. But it is mainly cultivated for use as fodder or starch because typically, as people's diets improve, production as food decreases. However, this is not the case in Japan where production of sweet potatoes as food has not declined significantly even as their production as animal feed and starch has fallen. This can be attributed to advancements in selective breeding that have led to the sweet potato gaining acceptance as a food in its own right. Nicely textured, sweet and nutritious to boot, sweet potatoes are often eaten as a snack. It is especially liked by women, being regarded as a beauty enhancer. If there again came a time when we could not eat rice, I doubt we would find it unbearable to have to again make do with sweet potatoes.

According to expert information on uses of sweet potatoes, I noticed that besides food, starch and fodder, there is a category for alcohol. This was just after I had carefully read cover story 6 on "High Hopes for Biomass as New Energy Source" (page 20). So I assumed it meant potatoes being used for ethanol fuel, as a biofuel alternative to gasoline. But alas, it referred to fuel for humans, namely *imo-jochu*, an alcoholic drink made from sweet potatoes. In Japan, *sake* and *shochu* are the country's representative alcoholic drinks. *Shochu* is typically made from rice or barley, but *imo-jochu* (another type of *shochu*) is made in parts of Japan, especially in Kyushu where sweet potatoes are cultivated in great quantity.

Whether it be bioethanol or sunlight, what human beings ultimately depend on is nature. In the harvest season, we should show respect for Mother Nature and repay our debt of gratitude by using environmentally friendly technologies. **JS**



Potato digging is a regular autumn event at kindergartens and elementary schools.