

## Apple farmer raises 'miracle' fruit

### After years of failure, business is blooming for Aomori orchardist

By YUMI OZAKI

HIROSAKI, Aomori Pref. (Kyodo) It was many years ago, but apple-farming guru Akinori Kimura remembers his breakthrough well.

The 57-year-old Kimura recounts how after leaving high school he joined a company in Tokyo but returned to Hirosaki, his hometown in Aomori Prefecture, after three years to marry and take up apple farming.



Farmer Akinori Kimura of Hirosaki, Aomori Prefecture, says to one of his pesticide-free apples, "Thanks a lot. You did a great job!"  
KYODO PHOTO

Restricted from using pesticides and chemical fertilizers on their land because of severe reactions they caused on his wife's skin, Kimura gradually reduced his reliance on the artificial farming aids with the goal of phasing them out completely in a matter of years.

But his trees grew vulnerable to insects and disease, and for five years running the situation failed to improve. The family income dwindled and neighbors called Kimura a failure. His debt mounted. The couple stopped talking.

Able to bear the pressure no more, Kimura one evening resolved to commit suicide. He took a rope and hiked up a mountainside to do the deed, but under the moonlight made the discovery that would save him.

There, acorns were growing wild, without the support of pesticides. And they were overflowing.

"If I can reproduce this environment, I will succeed," Kimura,

speaking at an organic food store in the fashionable Tokyo shopping district of Ginza, recalls thinking.

Kimura got to work. He experimented with varieties of soil that he placed in used sake cups. And, with notes taken on the backs of pamphlets he received from the local newspaper delivery service, he went to the library to carefully research insects native to his farm.

In the eighth year of his endeavors one tree produced seven apple blossoms and later produced two small apples in the autumn. The following spring his entire orchard was covered with white apple blossoms. The Kimuras were reduced to tears, viewing the splendid landscape from their perch overlooking their farm.

There was no longer any fear of pests in his orchard, which had been restored to its natural balance. Drops of diluted vinegar sprinkled by hand were all that was needed to protect against diseases. His weed-strewn field also had the added effect of providing insulation and heat retention. All weeds were clipped at once in the autumn to help with the apples' taste and color as well.

"I tell the apples what season it is," Kimura said with a wry smile.

The apple farming industry, which had experienced a spate of improvements in cultivation methods since the fruit was imported from the United States about 130 years ago, nevertheless became vulnerable to disease. Cultivation without the use of pesticides and fertilizers was commonly believed well nigh impossible.

Now Kimura, who grows rice and vegetables together with apples in the same way, is busy with speaking engagements throughout the country, including lecture meetings at hospitals and schools, as well as overseas in South Korea and Taiwan.

"We can only help them along the way. Apples can grow by themselves of course, but we, the farmers, are here to make it more conducive for them to grow disease-free," Kimura said in his speech at the organic food store.

His skill has earned Kimura the respect of experts like Fumio Yamauchi, a professor emeritus of agriculture at Tohoku

University, who studied Kimura's "miracle" apple cultivation methods for more than 10 years.

"Kimura's superb observation capabilities, along with his ingenious methods, paved the way for him to grow farm products that are eco-friendly and competitive in the world market," said Yamauchi, 75. "His methods are scientifically sound."

Kimura has developed a following among farmers as well.

Etsuo Sasaki, 61, who retired from the presidency of a construction company at the age of 60, began apple farming in the city of Toono, Iwate Prefecture, under the guidance of Kimura, after having been impressed by one of his speeches.

"I wanted to change my life dramatically. Kimura said to me, 'Apple farming is very difficult.' But I wanted to validate the evidence of Kimura's methods," Sasaki said.

Alas, the disciple has a ways to go. Only small apples were left last year after the trees were stripped of almost all their leaves in the summer. This year, too, Sasaki's orchard suffered from pests and diseases, following the same tribulations that Kimura went through. "My apples are little more than an illusion. But some day I want to harvest a crop of 'miracle' apples such as those of my master," Sasaki said.

Apples have grown to be Japan's No. 1 fruit export in terms of volume. Also, shipments to Taiwan helped gain the island's entry to the World Trade Organization in 2002, which resulted in the scrapping of its import quotas, while exports to China and Europe are expected to remain on a growth trend.

Kimura's dream is to make farm produce as free from pesticides and chemicals as possible.

"I want to change farmers' conventional thoughts and those of distributors and consumers," Kimura said. "I've been branded as strange for three decades. But my way has never been improper. Japan's food culture is on the verge of collapse. I'll try hard to pass along the importance of agriculture and food as long as I live."

The Japan Times: Thursday, Oct. 4, 2007  
(C) All rights reserved

[Go back to The Japan Times Online](#)

[Close window](#)