

Organic Tea Farm



Introduction to organic Japanese tea

If you walk around at both an organic tea farm and a non-organic tea farm in the summer season, you will quickly understand that an organic tea farm lives together in the ecosystem and a non-organic tea farm tries to control the ecosystem. And we know the advancement of each approach of organic and modern cultivation is completely different, and each has advantages. We, at Hibiki-an pay respects to both ways. First, we would like to introduce the features of organic Japanese tea. Why is the flavor of organic Japanese tea so simple and traditional? How formidable is organic tea cultivation and certified organic tea? Meanwhile, we would like to make known the contributions of modern cultivation through the insight into organic cultivation.

Overview of organic Japanese tea certification

To be officially certified organic, it is necessary to meet the requirements listed below.

- No chemical fertilizer or pesticides for at least three years.
- Only use organic fertilizer with no genetic modification (no GMOs).
- The tea must be processed and packaged in separate facilities and lines only for organic tea.
- Documents must be filed which prove all requirements are met throughout the growing, processing, and packaging, and which can be traced.
- All documents, tea farms, processing facilities, and packaging locations are periodically inspected by the organic certification organization.

Organic cultivation is to grow agricultural crops the historic way before modern agriculture. To be officially certified as Organic is documented proof that the tea has been grown in that way. To grow organic tea and to have that tea certified officially creates a unique and pristine environment, which requires special efforts.



Creating the organic tea farm

Today the vast majority of tea is non-organic, also known as conventionally-grown. Only a small percentage (much less than one percent of all tea) is organic. It is difficult just to make an organic tea farm because there are so many non-organic tea farms around it. Dispersals of chemical fertilizer or pesticide and chemical agents interfused through the soil from surrounding farms can enter the organic farm. Therefore it is necessary to make a buffer zone or shelterbelt between an organic tea farm and non-organic tea farm or to embrace organic tea cultivation together with the neighboring farmers.



Buffer zone to separate organic tea farm and non-organic



Shelterbelt



Tea trees of the end of the organic tea farm are lengthened, to prevent pesticide interfusion. It is a Shelterbelt.

Features of organic Japanese tea

Organic tea has a simple and traditional flavor which is probably the same as teas grown many years ago in ancient Japan. And organic tea more directly brings the antecedents in the flavor than non-organic tea. The antecedents are the features of breed, soil, climate, and efforts by the farmer.

Therefore the flavor of organic Japanese tea is quite affected by these efforts, climate and soil. To grow high grade and quality organic tea, it is required to meet some terms, which are (1) extra time and effort, (2) the range of temperature between day and night in the rolling hills, and (3) calcareous earth. There are not so many places even in Japan which are perfect for farming high quality organic tea.

Generally, it is said that high grade and quality gyokuro and matcha need much fertilizer. It is not

easy to grow high grade and quality organic gyokuro and organic matcha because organic fertilizer works slowly. (In contrast chemical fertilizer works quickly and efficiently in about a month and organic fertilizer works slowly for 3 to 9 months.)

When a lot of time and effort is put into the growing of organic tea, the tea flavor can become truly excellent. (eg. our Organic Gyokuro, Organic Sencha Premium, Organic Matcha etc.) However, unfortunately such excellent grade and quality organic tea is rare, because most organic farmers think that growing such high grade organic tea will not bring farmers economic success, but just require a lot of time and effort. Most tea farmers in Japan grow low to middle grade organic teas.

And as above, organic fertilizer works slowly. So, organic tea trees are more of a burden than non-organic tea trees. To put it the other way around, chemical fertilizer in non-organic tea farms makes the growing process much more easy. From the perspective of modern cultivation, it can be said that it produced considerable improvement of traditional cultivation and brought the tea industry amazingly high productivity. It is definitely one of the contributions of modern agriculture.



Organic tea farm surrounded by rolling hills



Brooks run in and around our tea farms helping to create mist in the morning, which is necessary for growing high quality tea.



Many of our tea farms have ideally calcareous earth. Fossils used to be dug up near our tea farms.

Beneficial insects and bugs

Bugs start to rush around with vivacity in June. The brown portions of tea leaves shown in the picture have been eaten by harmful insects. In contrast, the tea leaves on the right side picture taken at a non-organic tea farm at the same time have not really been eaten by harmful insects. These brown portions of tea leaf ruin the tea's excellent taste and aroma, so of course we do not use these portions in our tea.

But fortunately, spiders and other insects come to the rescue to prevent our special organic teas from being damaged. You can see a spider's web among the tea trees on the organic tea farm. Spiders, lizards, mantis, and ladybugs are natural enemies of harmful insects, and they carry out important duties on the organic tea farm. When a non-organic tea farm is changed to an organic tea farm, the natural enemies begin thriving in the area about 3 years later.

If you walk around at both an organic tea farm and a non-organic tea farm in the summer season, you will quickly understand that an organic tea farm lives together in the ecosystem and a non-organic

tea farm tries to control the ecosystem. Meanwhile you will realize the advancement and the economic efficiency of modern cultivation.



Tea farm having been changing to organic in July



Non organic tea farm in July



Organic tea farm on which tea leaves don't eaten by harmful insects.



Spider's web among the tea trees on the organic tea farm



Mantis on the organic tea farm



Rampant weeds growing close together

Soil at the organic tea farm

Organic tea farm soil generally contains more air and is softer than non-organic tea farm soil. But this also depends on the quantity of fertilizer used. Large quantities of organic fertilizer make the soil soft and more airy. This is true for both organic and non-organic tea farms. The soil becomes airy due to the beneficial bacteria breathing in the soil and creating nutrients and a healthy environment for the tea to grow. In this light and airy soil many beings (eg; earthworm, embryo of insect, ant, etc.) make their habitats.

Below pictures were taken at three types of tea farms (organic tea farm, non-organic gyokuro and sencha tea farms) when we inspected the pH of each tea farm. You will tell the difference of softness from each soil.



Soil of organic tea farm managed well



Embryo of beetle in soil at organic tea farm



Soil of gyokuro tea farm managed well



Soil of sencha tea farm managed well



Inspecting pH of each tea farm



You can tell that a well-managed tea farm's soil has a neutral pH. Though tea trees are generally tolerant to acidic soil, neutral soil is more desirable.

The second harvested organic tea (Nibancha)

Nibancha, made from the second tea harvest of the year is more difficult for organic than non-organic tea farms. With non-organic tea trees, almost the same amount of Nibancha can be harvested as the first crop of (Ichibanacha) tea leaves. But organic tea trees second harvest only produces about 30% to 50% of the amount of the first harvest. And unfortunately, the second harvested organic tea flavor is generally worse than the second harvested non-organic tea.

As already stated, organic fertilizer works slowly and organic tea trees are more of a burden than non-organic tea trees. Therefore it is difficult to make high quality and large amount of a second organic crop of Nibancha.

We at Hibiki-an do not harvest a second organic crop of Nibancha, so all the organic tea you enjoy is from the first harvest, which is the best anyway. We do this in order to lighten the organic tea trees' burden without using chemical fertilizers. It naturally brings out an excellent taste and aroma for next year's harvest.

The struggle with weeds

In the tea region of Uji during the long summer months, the sun is blazing hot and the air is damp with humidity. These conditions along with the plentiful fertilizer fed to the tea plants creates favorable conditions not only for the tea plants, but for weeds as well. For weeds, a tea farm in the summer season is a very comfortable environment indeed.

The pictures below are typical weeds that farmers must struggle with. The picture on the left side is a vine plant. It is a hassle to pluck vines away from the tea trees because long vines insistently entwine with the tea trees. The right side of the picture is the foliage of the vines entwining with the tea trees. To the right of that is a picture of a felon herb at the tea farm. Again, to the right of that is a type of fern.

It is said that weeding in the summer is the hardest work. Today many young farmers are not willing to weed. But here at Hibiki-an, weeding continues from July to the end of September.

Most weeding work is done not by machine but by hand. To prevent the weeds from absorbing nutrients from the fertilizer, weeds growing near the tea trees must be quickly rooted up. In order to do so, farmers must remain in a half-crouching position for a long time. The tea farm under the scorching sun is like a sauna. And in the early evening, when the hot sun finally begins to set, mosquitoes appear on the scene, adding to the plight of the tea farmer. As they say, organic farming is a struggle with mother earth, but a struggle with wonderful rewards.

Not only is weeding in summer the hardest work, but it is also the most expensive work. Modern non-organic cultivation needs little weeding, so much less than organic cultivation, and in general takes less time. From the perspective of modern cultivation, it can be said that it produced considerable improvement of traditional cultivation and brought the tea industry amazingly high productivity. It is definitely one of the contributions of modern agriculture.



The right side of the picture is the foliage of the vines entwining with the tea trees.



Felon herbs at the tea farm



A type of fern



Cutting weeds by machine



Rooting up weeds around the tea tree by hand



Rooted up weeds

Documentation (record keeping) and Audit

To be officially certified as organic, Hibiki-an must complete documentation (record keeping) and an annual audit.

Documentation (record keeping):

The following matters are obliged to be strictly documented without omission. (1) Purchasing organic fertilizer and so on, (2) Tea farm operation, which are fertilizing, weeding, harvesting, and so on, (3) Production outputs and control of all of them, (4) Delivery management. Every day, we keep records of our organic tea delivery, because it is required to keep records on every single item that we create.


If a year's worth of documents is piled up, the height becomes approximately 60 to 90cm (2 to 3 ft)!

Audit:

An annual audit is practiced every year by the auditor of the organic certification body. All of the above documents; our organic tea farm; as well as our processing, cooperative, and packaging facilities are inspected to make sure they meet and exceed the organic certification requirements. It takes about three days by one or two auditors!

In the unlikely event that any requirements are not met, all of our organic shipments would be stopped immediately, until the problem is cleared up, but this has never happened at Hibiki-an and we do not expect it to happen in the future.

As above, it is not easy and involves much time and effort to prove organic authenticity. To be authentically organic, the proofing procedure is strictly observed by continuous daily efforts.



JAPANESE GREEN TEA
HIBIKI-AN

Genuine Japanese tea shipped worldwide from the tea farms of Uji in Kyoto, Japan - for your green moment