

Lonely furrow: Little pay dirt for organic farming in Japan

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Yuya Shibakai working at his organic vegetable farm outside Tokyo, where he produces organic lettuce, tomatoes, carrots and other vegetables

Yuya Shibakai sometimes feels he is ploughing a lonely furrow.

The Japanese farmer produces organic lettuce, tomatoes, carrots and other vegetables for a [market](#) that has tasted nothing like the success of the sector in other advanced economies.

On his farm outside Tokyo, the 32-year-old doggedly trudges along a line of lettuces, pulling up weeds by hand.

Shibakai says it is a "daily struggle to find ways to make a profit using a system you could call inefficient, where you have to pull all the weeds out by hand."

"We need a different supply system in Japan, a sustainable structure for farmers that would also change the way our profession is seen," added Shibakai, who took over the business from his parents in 2009.

Organic farming occupied just 0.5 percent of Japan's entire arable area in 2016. The country hopes to double this by 2019, Akimi Uenaka, an official in charge of organic farming at the agriculture ministry, told AFP.

However, Uenaka admitted the development of the sector in Japan was "slow", as weeding and pest control take more time and organic farms struggle to produce a "stable" output due to technical limitations.



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Shibakai is one of 12,000 [organic farmers](#) in the whole country, according to statistics from 2010, the last time the agriculture ministry collected figures from the nascent sector.

While a craze for healthy eating has fuelled lucrative sales around the world, the market for "bio" or [organic food](#) in Japan is estimated to be worth just over \$1 billion.

The world's third-largest economy has a mere fraction of the global market of around \$90 billion and is dwarfed by the US (\$45 billion),

Germany (\$11 billion), France (\$8 billion) and China (\$7 billion).

Moreover, while even most of these mature markets are enjoying solid growth, the sector in Japan is stagnating.



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Minuscule offerings

One of the few players to dip a toe into the market is French organic retailer "Bio c'Bon," which has had a presence in Japan since the end of

2016 and just opened its third shop in Tokyo.

A dearth of large-scale farming means the company has to work with around 200 individual farms for its fruit and vegetables and even import other goods—for example raspberries from Mexico, as well as organic wines and cheeses from France.

One of the problems faced by shops offering organic food is a Japanese obsession with how fruit and vegetables look and are packaged.

"Especially during the week, Japanese customers tend to shop very quickly and grab pre-packaged and pre-weighed goods," said Pascal Gerbert-Gaillard, Asia director at Bio c'Bon.



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"We are working to find a good balance between our brand and Japanese consumption habits," he added.

As an example, he says his staff minutely check for any tiny imperfections in their vegetables and remove them from sale. They are donated to staff members.

Gerbert-Gaillard said organic food is gradually finding a market among "Japanese aged between 30 and 40, especially mothers, and expats."

The firm has ambitious plans to grow its "minuscule offerings" by expanding to "around 30 shops in Tokyo and its suburbs before the 2020 Olympics," he said.

But well-established smaller players have already found that organic food can be slow to gain traction.



Yuya Shibakai doggedly trudges along a line of vegetables, pulling up weeds by hand

Rika Oishi founded her organic firm SuperOrganic seven years ago, hoping to capitalise on a boom in demand—especially from foreigners—for "healthy" food after the Fukushima earthquake and nuclear meltdown.

"I have noticed a bit more interest down the years from consumers and firms, but it has not yet become a way of life," she said.

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