

# Superior Tea Supporting Biodiversity

Practitioners of the *chagusaba* farming method in Kakegawa, Shizuoka Prefecture maintain an age-old method of tea cultivation that not only produces superior tea but also preserves the area's rich biological diversity.

**T**he tea fields of Shizuoka Prefecture contribute to some of Japan's most famous and distinctive landscapes. The long, low, meticulously pruned rows of tea, viewed on clear days against a backdrop of Mount Fuji,

are familiar to anyone who has taken the Tokaido Shinkansen between Tokyo and Hamamatsu. Passengers who disembark at Kakegawa and venture into the coastal plains of Shizuoka will soon discover a unique variation on the theme: mosaic-like

patterns of tea fields (*chabara*) interspersed with semi-natural fields of grass (*chagusaba*).

Collectively, these fields are the last vestiges of a traditional tea-grass (*chagusa*) integrated system that in 2013 was classified as a Globally



Cut fields of natural grass (*chagusaba*) viewed across a tea field in Kakegawa, Shizuoka Prefecture. At the top of the mountain slope in the distance, trees have been planted in the shape of the kanji character for tea, *cha*. The famous local landmark has been maintained since 1932.





Tea farmers bundle cut grass — predominantly silver grass and *sasa* broadleaf bamboo — on a mountain slope in Kakegawa, Shizuoka Prefecture.

Important Agricultural Heritage System (GIAHS) by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

Farmers in this part of Shizuoka have preserved and proudly promote this form of tea cultivation for the superior quality of the tea it produces. Coincidentally, the method also protects hundreds of species of flora and fauna that elsewhere have been lost to modern farming methods. The rare flowers, insects and birds of Kakegawa are the descendants of organisms that inhabited the region thousands of years ago.

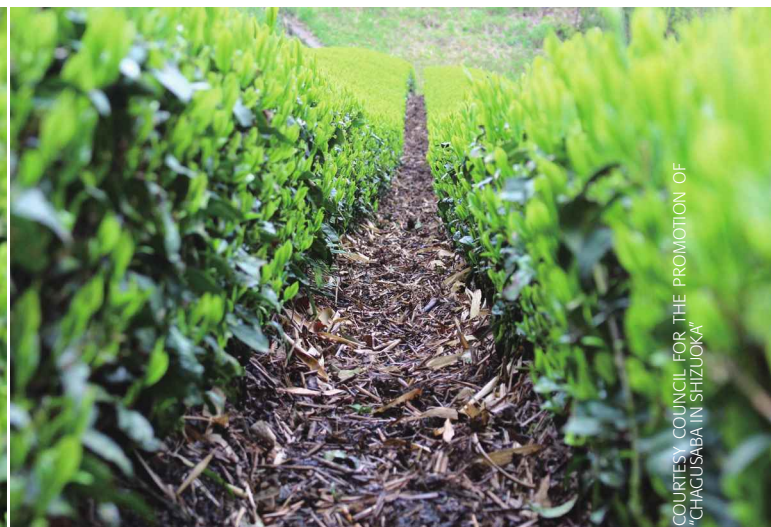
In the highly labor-intensive form of tea cultivation practiced in Kakegawa, grass is cut by hand from fall to winter and then dried. Once dried, the grass is matted and laid down in the furrows between the tea plants from winter to spring. The cutting and mulching of chagusaba grass, which is typically planted on steep slopes in fields approximately equal in size to the tea plantations they support, accounts for about 60% of all labor hours in tea cultivation from fall to spring.

The mulching of tea fields with grass from chagusaba aids in the production of high-quality tea and pro-

vides various benefits, such as improving the environment for root growth by moderating soil temperature and conserving soil moisture; weed control; prevention of soil and fertilizer runoff; and supply of organic matter and improvement of the soil. All these benefits contribute to the maintenance of a stable and sustainable tea business in which cooperation among local farmers is strong. Some chagusaba are communal resources, and in a complementary tradition called *yui*, neighboring farmers help one another when an individual's labor is in short supply.

While the management of tea fields and tea harvests is carried out by individual farming households, the primary processing after harvest is typically conducted in local factories built by joint investment. Farmers that co-own a tea factory work to improve tea quality and branding as a cooperative. The use and conservation of chagusaba methods are also often carried out by local cooperatives, with the promotion of chagusaba teas as a superior, environment-friendly product at the forefront of such activities.

Nevertheless, tea prices in Japan have declined or remain flat, as the popularity of green tea generally has dwindled. The FAO expects that certification and promotion of the chagusaba method as "agricultural heritage" will help to build "a framework in



Cut-and-dried grass mulch is laid in furrows between the rows of tea plants.





High-quality tea is still picked by hand in Shizuoka Prefecture. Only the top two leaves of the plant are plucked.

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which farmers' efforts to produce quality tea can be appropriately rewarded and that adding value to the farmers' work will facilitate conservation of chagusaba and its biodiversity."

According to the FAO literature

supporting chagusaba's nomination as a GIAHS, "The fact that all chagusaba grassland is conserved by cutting only and not by pastured livestock or controlled burning, is evidence that the ancient style of Japanese satoyama

## About GIAHS

Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS) is a program established in 2002 with the purpose of conserving and sustaining traditional agricultures and cultures as well as landscapes that are in decline due to the effects of globalization, deterioration of the environment, and increasing populations. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), an international organization aiming at ensuring food safety, established GIAHS with the purpose of passing down to the future generations not only globally important agricultures and land usage, but also cultural elements related to agriculture, including ecology systems, landscapes, customs, and traditional cultures. Presently, there are eleven GIAHS sites in Japan.

Source: FAO



Cooperative workers rub fresh tea by hand to remove excess water content and make the leaves more supple.

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## The Three Leaf Mark

The Promotion Council for the GIAHS "Chagusaba Farming Method in Shizuoka" designation, comprised of leaders from communities in Shizuoka Prefecture where the farming method is practiced, established an authorized practitioner system for the Chagusaba Farming Method in September, 2013. The system evaluates the extent to which farmers make efforts to maintain chagusaba and its rich biodiversity in their production of high quality green tea. Teas produced by authorized practitioners are graded by ratio of the size of maintained chagusaba grassland to the entire tea farm. Producers may apply a seal to their teas announcing their use of the chagusaba farming method — one leaf = 5–25% grassland; two leaves = 25–50% grassland; three leaves = more than 50% grassland. The QR code on the seal directs consumers to the excellent [chagusaba.jp](http://chagusaba.jp) website.



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Some 300 plants including the "Seven Flowers of Autumn" are found growing in the grasslands of Kakegawa. The *kawara nadeshiko* dianthus (left) and *sasayuri* lily (right), once two of the more common flowers of Japan, are now quite rare. Flowers from the grasslands next to tea fields have traditionally been used in flower arrangements to accompany the tea ceremony.

survives to this day in Shizuoka. Moreover, grasslands conserved for the contemporary purpose of producing high-quality tea, rather than for conserving biodiversity, provide an inspiring example of landscapes in which conservation of biodiversity and modernization of tea cultivation are compatible."

Approximately 80% of the tea currently grown in all parts of Japan is the variety Yabukita. Farmers in Kakegawa, however, cultivate an additional thirteen varieties and some native tea plants are also being commercialized. The Council for the Promotion of "Chagusaba in Shizuoka" conducts numerous projects to promote the branding of the tea, such as hosting tea-tasting seminars and tea-pairing dinners.

Teas produced using the tea-grass integrated system bear the GIAHS hallmark on their packaging, and every mouthful of tea brewed using the leaves is savored like a fine wine, with gratitude to the farmers of the Shizuoka terroir.

Alex Hendy, *The Japan Journal*



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Chagusaba tea leaves are typically "deep steamed," producing a tea that steeps fast and is deep green and opaque.