

# Fukushima Dreams – a quarterly publication of Fukushima City — APRIL 2024

Thank you for picking up this quarters' "Fukushima Dreams – a quarterly publication of Fukushima City". In this issue, we hope that you will learn more about, and be moved by the various charms that Fukushima City has to offer. With a population of around 280,000 people, Fukushima is surrounded by the beauty of nature. Due to its location, the city has a characteristic basin climate, and is a famous fruit production area: producing many varieties through the seasons, including cherries, peaches, Asian pears, grapes and apples. We hope that through this edition, you'll come to appreciate even a little of what Fukushima City has to offer.



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① **A Spring Stroll Among the Flowers to Enjoy a Satoyama Landscape that Has Been Carefully Preserved by the Local Community**  
Springtime has finally arrived in Fukushima. On a beautiful sunny day, why not make the most of the season by visiting one of the city's numerous flower spots? This year, we are leaving the city center and heading south. Our first stop is the Mizuhara district, a village of flowers in Matsukawa-machi. Here you will be greeted by many kinds of beautiful flowers and rows of magnificent flowering cherry trees, which have been planted and protected by the local people, as well as by wildflowers such as the rare kumagaiso orchids.

② **The Uwadaiyama Weeping Cherry Trees**

③ **Most scenic period/Early to mid-April Fee/Free of charge (but please make a small donation if you like) Location/Uwadaiyama, Mizuhara, Matsukawa-machi, Fukushima City Parking/Free parking available The Uwadaiyama Weeping Cherry Tree Festival is held while the trees are in blossom. During the festival period the cherry blossoms will be lit up every evening between 18:00 and 21:00, and there will also be stalls on Saturdays and Sundays.**

④ **Masamitsu Tanno**

⑤ **Cherry trees donated by an organization working to preserve the local environment**

Twenty-five years ago, I never imagined that it would become such a tunnel of cherry blossoms like this (laughs). The impetus came from the Revitalization Group Mizuhara 21, which was established in 1992 for the purposes of creating an attractive community and beautifying the environment. I am one of the members of this group, and we are still conducting our activities. Initially, we carried out our work through a series of single-year plans. But in 1998, we began a three-year project called Mizuhara Flower Village Creation. For this project, we received a grant to plant trees such as crape myrtle and maple, and we started a campaign to fill the district with flowers. In the first year, we purchased 1,000 weeping cherry seedlings. In addition to distributing some of the seedlings to 320 households in the Mizuhara district, we also planted them in the grounds of meeting halls, shrines, and temples. When we were discussing other potential locations where we might plant these seedlings, I made the suggestion, "There is Uwadaiyama." Uwadaiyama was formerly the site of a mulberry plantation that had fallen into disrepair due to the decline of the sericulture industry and the aging of the population. A road about 560 meters long runs almost through the middle of the hilly plantation area, and I had the idea that if we planted weeping cherry trees on both sides of the road, people would be able to enjoy viewing cherry blossoms there. Everybody told me, "That's a great idea!" So, I consulted with the then chairman of the Sekihoku Neighborhood Association, obtained permission from all the landowners, and went ahead with the preparations, including removing the mulberry trees.

**108 cherry trees to inspire people, bring them together, and revitalize the community**

In March 1999, we planted the weeping cherry trees on Uwadaiyama. These trees have continued to flourish and grow thanks to the pruning, mowing, disinfecting, fertilizing, and other maintenance work that we have carried out together. As a result, the members of the neighborhood association can now enjoy the cherry blossom viewing while admiring the tunnel of 108 weeping cherry trees. Also, over time, more and more people began coming to see the cherry blossoms, and so in 2013 we started holding the Uwadaiyama Weeping Cherry Blossom Festival.

Some friends in my age group said they wanted to do something and wondered if we could light up the cherry blossoms, so in 2019 we launched the Mizuhara Uwadaiyama Weeping Cherry Blossom Cultivation Group. All the members of the neighborhood association are members of this group too (laughs). In March, we get ready for the festival by removing the dead branches, cleaning the gutters, and preparing the lanterns and other items. We also direct traffic during the festival period. In addition, since 2022, members of the group have opened a shop on Saturdays and Sundays, much to the delight of visitors.

**The Mizuhara district, where people's lives blend in with the flowers and the satoyama landscape**

My favorite scenery is the view of the two rows of cherry trees in the morning when the air is clear. The location is at the summit of a low hill, with an excellent view of the surrounding countryside, which also includes the snow-capped Mt. Atadara to the west and Mt. Sengannori to the east. Eight years ago, we planted another 100 Somei Yoshino cherry trees near Uwadaiyama. Once they mature, visitors will be able to enjoy rows of cherry trees at a second location in the Mizuhara district. The appeal of the Mizuhara district is not confined to its cherry blossoms, but also lies in the breathtaking natural beauty of the area. The Satoyama landscape is unforgettable and remains in the memory of every visitor. Moreover, it is a place where people's lives blend in with the mountains, rivers, rice paddies, fields, and other satoyama elements, and also with the abundant flowers. I hope that many people will visit Mizuhara and see this beauty in person.



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① **Kumagaiso no Sato**

② **Most scenic period/From early May for about 3 weeks Fee/Conservation activity cooperation fee 300 yen per person (junior high school students and older) Location/Kamakurayama, Mizuhara, Matsukawa-machi, Fukushima City Parking/Free parking available Viewing path/A 500 m walk from the parking lot (please wear comfortable walking shoes) The Kumagaiso no Sato Festival is held during the kumagaiso blooming period. Temporary toilets are available in the parking lot during the festival.**

③ **Takashi Suzuki**

④ **An accidental discovery about 30 years ago led to the establishment of a protection society 22 years ago.**

Mizuhara is a district where the local residents possess a strong desire to revitalize their community. Several organizations are active in the district, including the Revitalization Group Mizuhara 21 and Doinaka Mizuhara-go soba-uchi-kai (the Country Mizuhara Soba Noodle-making Association). Kumagaiso no Sato was originally started around 1991, when some local senior citizens discovered a wild-growing colony of kumagaiso (a plant known in English as the Japanese Lady Slipper Orchid). At that time, there were about 500 to 600 individual plants in this colony. Over the next decade, however, the number declined, mainly as a result of plant theft, and so in 2002, Mizuhara no shizen o mamoru-kai (the Mizuhara Nature Preservation Association) was established and began conservation activities. In 2009, this association received a Minister of the Environment Award for making a significant contribution toward protecting the local environment. I took on the role of chairman because I wanted to pass on the thoughts of my predecessors to the next generation. We currently have 35 members, some of whom live outside the Mizuhara district.



**Protecting local treasures and handing them down to future generations based on the advice of a Fukushima University professor**

Our major activities include repairing the wooden paths in the fall, clearing out branches and undergrowth in March, and preparing information boards, etc. During the kumagaiso blooming period in May, we take turns working in reception, parking lot management, safety management, and other tasks for the Kumagaiso no Sato Festival. For many years, we have been receiving advice from a professor at Fukushima University who conducts research on kumagaiso, such as on how much to cut back the branches after determining the amount of sunlight the plants will receive. The toughest challenge is, of course, coping with natural disasters. For instance, during Typhoon Hagibis, known in Japan as Typhoon No.19 or the Reiwa 1 East Japan Typhoon, in 2019, the mountain road became swollen with floodwater like a river and the subsequent restoration work took a long time. In this kind of situation, our main motivation remains the passion of our seniors who have continued to protect the area without asking for any compensation, and we see it as a challenge for the future to pass on that passion to the next generation. Until recently, we had been working with the children of Fukushima City Mizuhara Elementary School to protect the natural environment where kumagaiso blooms. However, since the school closed in March 2023, we are now thinking about how we can continue to involve children in conservation activities in the future.

**When the plants bloom in May, this cluster attracts wildflower lovers from all over the country.**

The Mizuhara district is unique in Japan in being a place where a around 37,000 kumagaiso orchids are growing wild. Even when they propagate naturally through underground rhizomes, the new plants take up to three years to flower. In addition, it is difficult to maintain the population, which makes it necessary to manage their native habitat through the preservation of the surrounding environment, such as by protecting the bumblebees that carry pollen. The results of a plant count survey conducted in 2022 revealed that there were 37,000 above-ground stems and 11,000 flowering plants, which was double the number of flowering plants counted in a previous survey conducted six years earlier, and I am looking forward to this year's blooming period. It is hard to say for certain why the number of plants has increased, but it was partly because of the weather during the years in question, including the amount of sunlight shining through the trees, and there may also have been other factors. But in any event, I am delighted with the results. In recent years, the numbers of people coming from places as far away as Kyushu and Hokkaido have been increasing. It makes me happy when visitors tell me they are glad they came. Another attraction of Mizuhara is the diversity of its wildflowers, which include nirinso and yamabukiso. Also, there is yamashakuyaku, which has a short-lived flower that blooms for only two or three days, so if you want to see it you need to get your timing just right! The 20th Kumagaiso no Sato Festival begins in early May. The kumagaiso flowers will be blooming all over the slopes while all facing in the same direction. Please visit us in Mizuhara and take a look.

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① About 25 minutes by car from the Fukushima-Ozaso Interchange on the Tohoku Chuo Expressway, is Kanta Farm, located in the Ohira district of Ozaso, Fukushima City, and run by Mika Kanta. At the Farm Resort Wild Campsite, which opened in 2021, the optional activities include a tent sauna, oil drum bathing, and four-wheel buggy driving, as well as free agricultural experiences that visitors can enjoy in the great outdoors. In this article, we would also like to introduce you to Mika Kanta, who took over a small corner what had become a marginalized village and transformed it into a healing spot that fills its visitors with a sense of wellbeing.

② Mika Kanta

③ This wild campsite in a marginal village is a natural wonderland that will fill you with a sense of wellbeing.

④ In 2012, she reorganized her private business into a corporation and started an agricultural experience farm stay.

Mika Kanta was born as the eldest daughter of a farming family that has been working the land since the Edo period. While supporting her parents in their farming endeavors, she started a relaxation studio to see what else she could do while she was raising her own children. The business flourished, and over the course of a decade, she opened a total 23 relaxation salons.

Just as she was beginning to think that everything would now be smooth sailing, the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake struck. In 2012, she incorporated her business and established Life Rope Corporation with the idea of doing something to help revitalize Fukushima, which was facing a lot of major challenges at the time. The company's name was inspired by her wish "to connect people's lives with rope." Since then, she has not only supported individuals in their daily lives but also connected people with each other through her two main businesses, namely the relaxation salon business and the farm stay business, which encompasses direct sales of agricultural products and agricultural experience.

From the beginning, Kanta Farm's agricultural experience farm-stay business has provided its participants with free accommodation including meals. Kanta explains the reason for this. "On the farm, we grow vegetables and fruits using minimal amounts of pesticides, well-matured compost, and bamboo powder. We carry the compost in wheelbarrows and spread it over the fields with shovels, plow with tractors, sow vegetable seeds, and plant seedlings. All of these experiences are serious farm work, and I feel bad about asking the participants for money. So, I let them stay at my parents' house and provide them with meals as a sort of 'thank you.' Before the COVID-19 pandemic, we had a lot of foreign visitors coming."

Noticing the beauty of the starry sky and the power of nature in the fields that spread across a marginal village

Nine years after the Great East Japan Earthquake, Mika Kanta decided to review her business in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. "My parents were now over 80 years old, which meant that as their successor, I had to put even more effort into farming. So, I decided to scale back the relaxation salon business."

After she began taking measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 infections while continuing to accept people who wanted to experience agricultural work, the number of applications she received from people in the Tokyo metropolitan area and from foreigners became less and less. In place of this, however, she began to accept weekly visits from people living alone in Fukushima City and from university students. Then, one day, she casually looked up at the night sky in the Ohira area and saw the sky filled with stars! "Originally, this area was reclaimed land that had been cleared after the Second World War by people repatriated from overseas and evacuees who wished to return to farming. In 1971, when government support for land cultivation was discontinued, the population began to decline and the area eventually became a marginal village. My great-uncle was one of the original pioneers, and since he had no heirs, my father took over the land from him." Through her farming experience, Kanta came to feel more strongly than before that spending time in the great outdoors, having a place she could easily go to at any time, and the joy of working were therapeutic. "I thought that if I could make use of the idle farmland and woodland and turn them into a campsite, I could introduce many people to the charms of the Ohira area and make it a place of healing."

A simple handmade campsite that makes the most of the natural beauty of this area of reclaimed land

About a year after Kanta conceived the concept, the long-awaited wild campsite opened in 2021. The place is truly a campsite made by hand that began with the felling of overgrown trees with chainsaws and saws, in a cooperative effort by many people connected through the agricultural experience business. The facilities are simple, but in addition to the chirping of wild birds and the sound of the wind, visitors can enjoy a feast of nature, ranging from beetles in the summer, red and gold leaves in the fall, and a silvery white world of snow in the winter. The campsite is also said to be a popular location for wedding photos taken against the backdrop of the blue sky and the natural greenery. Spring is the best season for wild vegetables. So, why not take a break from the hustle and bustle and head out to the countryside?



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① Fukushima Flower Corridor Digital Rally

② Visit Fukushima City's flower corridor spots, sightseeing spots, and restaurants, get stamps on your smartphone, and win gorgeous prizes!

Application Period

Prize draws will be held three times during the period.

1st time: Thursday, March 21 – Tuesday, April 30

2nd time: Wednesday, May 1 – Friday, May 31

3rd time: Saturday, June 1 – Sunday, June 30

Fukushima Three Famous Hot Springs Prize

Can be used at Izaka Onsen, Tsuchiyu Onsen, or Takayu Onsen

Accommodation subsidy coupon worth 20,000 yen

15 people

Fukushima Local Sake Prize

Carefully crafted in Fukushima

Delicious sake worth 4,000 yen

180 people

Fukushima Sweets Premium Prize

Made with agricultural products from Fukushima City

Confectionery items worth 4,000 yen

180 people

Fukushima Gourmet Prize

A rich variety of delicacies from Fukushima worth 3,000 yen

210 people

Fukushima Delicious Rice Prize

Local pride

2 kg of Koshihikari rice from Fukushima City

1,344 people

W Chance

Fukushima Flower Corridor Special Prize

An assortment of products from Roadside Station Fukushima, Roadside Station Tsuchiyu, and Fukushima Product Promotion Center

Worth 4,000 yen

50 people

\*People who receive a stamp at 10 or more Flower Corridor spots will be eligible for above prize draw.

③ Step 1

Register to participate on LINE!

Fukushima Flower Corridor Digital Rally LINE official account

Step 2

Visit each spot and scan the QR code with your smartphone.

Flower Corridor Spots and Sightseeing Spots

Scan the QR code installed at each spot.

Eating and Drinking Establishments

After eating and drinking, scan the QR code at the cash register when paying.

Get your stamps!

Step 3

Collect 4 stamps and apply!

\*To be eligible to apply, at least 2 out of 4 stamps must be obtained at a Flower Corridor spot.

