



Sustainable Urban Development through Beekeeping

The Ginza Mitsubachi (honey bees) Project promotes the rich natural environment of Tokyo through urban beekeeping, right from Ginza—one of the world's leading shopping towns.

The practice of urban beekeeping—the keeping of bees on the roofs of buildings in urban areas—in addition to playing a role in the greening process, is said to help conserve and restore biodiversity, and even vitalize local areas.

The Ginza Mitsubachi Project (hereafter ginpachi), considered the pioneer of urban beekeeping in Japan, began in 2006 with the keeping of bees on the roof of the Pulp & Paper Building in the Ginza 3-chome area of Chuo City. People tend to think of beekeeping as something that is done in lush, mountainous areas. They may be surprised to learn that some urban areas are actually considered quite suitable for beekeeping, due to the large parks and roadside trees scattered about, and the relative lack of pesticides due to concerns about the environment.

Ginpachi is working to promote rooftop greening in order to expand the amount of nectar that is available to honey bees. Their bee gardens have begun popping up all around the city, atop commercial buildings and department stores, among other locations. This is due in part to the greening subsidy program offered by Chuo City, where Ginza is located, and the role that rooftop greening is

Top image: Honey bees gather nectar within a three-kilometer radius, visiting gardens like those of the Imperial Palace and Hibiya Park.

said to play in mitigating the so-called heat island effect. The expansion of greenery in the city has increased the number of insects in Ginza, which in turn has attracted swallows and other wild birds that prey on these insects. The regular seeding, planting, and harvesting events used to maintain this greenery have also presented new opportunities for community development, in a way that transcends occupation or generation.

A Town Tapped into the Cultural Zeitgeist

There are three ginpachi apiaries in Ginza and two in Marunouchi. Combined, they produced just over two tons of honey in 2022. The harvested honey is sold wholesale to department stores, restaurants, hotels, and bars in the area, where it is used to make desserts, cocktails, cosmetics, and more. These products, made with the rare commodity that is Ginza honey, are very popular gifts.



The bees forage from different flowers depending on the season, which results in changes in the color and flavor of the honey.

Indeed, the area's restaurant industry was from the start very supportive of the project, and was eager to develop new products based on the idea of urban beekeeping—the consensus being that a Ginza honey would be fun and interesting.

“I think a lot of people were willing to work with us and found this project interesting because it started in Ginza, a town that's set many trends and shaped cultural zeitgeist. I think that's how we were able to grow the project as much as we have,” says ginpachi beekeeper Fukuhara Tamotsu.

Beekeeping from Tokyo to the World

Ginpachi's efforts are not limited to rooftop greening. They have also been putting considerable effort into



Ginza, with its long-established department stores and luxury-brand flagship stores, is a popular shopping area frequented by tourists. Photo: iStock

regional vitalization and environmental education. Some examples of their efforts in environmental education include the hosting of visiting classes at elementary schools, and tours and lectures about their rooftop apiaries, which they use to promote learning about honey bee ecology and the urban environment.

Many international researchers have visited the site. This was especially true during the Rugby World Cup 2019 in Japan, with some of them combining site inspections with attending the games. “I think part of the reason why we've had so many visitors—from Japan but also overseas—is how easy it is to get to Ginza. Only in that area would you be able to tour an apiary, then turn around and go to some tourist attractions and enjoy some shopping,” says Fukuhara.

The project, which began in Ginza, has now expanded to over 100 sites in Japan, and is even being implemented abroad, in Seoul, Taipei, and elsewhere. This culminated in the establishment of the Mitsubachi Project Association in April 2023. Fukuhara says, “The goal of the project is to help realize a community-based, recycling-oriented society through the practice of urban beekeeping. We want to promote this project further, both within Japan and overseas, while also communicating that Tokyo as a city has begun to make these moves to better coexist with the natural environment.” The future developments of the project, which aims to connect people to people and people to cities, will be exciting indeed.